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# A DREAMER'S HARVEST





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# A DREAMER'S HARVEST

BY

#### MOUNT HOUMAS

AUTHOR OF "A TRAGIC CONTRACT," ETC.

# LONDON GREENING & CO., LTD.

20 CECIL COURT, CHARING CROSS ROAD
1905

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# To the Memory of AUNT BECK

"If all her good deeds were flowers,
The air would be faint with perfume."
INGERSOLL.

"If we could only foresee the ending of some of the unholy schemes that many of us are apt to weave, we might be more content to leave them humbly in a higher hand than ours. Do they ever bring good, these plans, born of our utter selfishness? I think not. They may seem to succeed triumphantly, but—watch the triumph to the end."—Mrs Henry Wood.



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# A DREAMER'S HARVEST

#### PART I

#### CHAPTER I

#### THE HONEYSUCKLE COTTAGE

"In all the storms of this wide world, What wind would mar the violet?"

EVERYBODY said it was a picturesque little village. Everybody admired the ideal little cottage on its outskirts, with its thatched roof and rustic porch, round which the fragrant honeysuckle-vine lovingly clung. And everybody was charmed with its little inmate—pretty Hessie Lane—the idol of the village—who was so vain and coquettish, so ambitious and wilful, and, at the same time, so incomprehensibly irresistible.

So it was no wonder that, on this warm spring afternoon, a weary, thirsty cyclist should suddenly dismount on catching sight of this inviting cottage, rendered all the more attractive on this occasion because Hessie sat on the low step of the porch, and

reclined against one of the wooden vine-covered pillars—a charming little figure in a blue gingham gown, with an old, wide-brimmed white straw hat perched on the back of her head. The dimpled, childish face, framed by the billowy dark hair, glowed with health; the large brown eyes sparkled; the pretty lips were crimson. A striking picture of artless charm and beauty.

The exhausted worldling was impressed. He leaned his machine against the wooden paling dividing the little garden from the road, and, opening the tiny gate, walked boldly up the narrow gravel path, which was bordered on each side by gay flowers.

Hessie, without changing her comfortable position, looked up at him with mild surprise. She felt too indolent, that enervating afternoon, to be startled by anything. He was a big man—fair and handsome—and she saw in his face that he had passed the spring-time of youth.

He raised his cap as he stood before her, and spoke with the easy courtesy of a gentleman:

"Pardon this cool intrusion," he said. "Pray accept my humble apologies. But, do you know, I found your pretty, shady home absolutely irresistible; I am so hot and tired! Will you kindly allow me to rest here a few minutes?—and may I trouble you for a glass of water?"

Hessie's listlessness suddenly vanished: she rose

with alacrity, and pointed to the step with a smile.

"Sit down and rest by all means," she said. "I will fetch you some water."

"Thank you so much."

She speedily returned with the eagerly-desired draught. After thirstily draining the glass and gratefully declining her offer of more, he languidly seated himself at one end of the step and leaned wearily back against the pillar behind him. Hessie replaced the glass; and then, after a little hesitation, resumed her seat at the other end of the step.

Their eyes met in frank admiration and curiosity.

"How pretty and quiet it is here!" the stranger said, glancing about him. "But you seem almost isolated. There are no houses exactly near you, and this road is not, apparently, much frequented."

"No," said Hessie. "This cottage is the last on the outskirts of the village, and is a little distance from it. But the village is considered a very lively and flourishing one for its size. The Hall is near," and she pointed to its towers, visible above the intervening park.

"Ah! a fine old place," he observed. "I have heard of it."

Then silence fell upon them and reigned for some moments. The stranger turned his face towards the house. He watched the feeble flutter of the snowy-muslin curtains at the open windows—

there was a window on each side of the door—and listened for any sound within, but none was audible. The rest of the family were evidently out; indeed, he had guessed as much from the girl's manner. Would she have received him so confidently had she not been mistress of the field? He felt grateful to her; and then he began to speculate as to what the elders would say if, when they returned—and they might return any moment—they found a strange man established on their porch, chatting away to their pretty daughter. He thought it politic to make the following remark:

"This shady porch is very delightful, and I am loth to leave it; but perhaps your people will not give me so kind a welcome, and I had better bestir myself."

But he looked most reluctant, and made no effort to depart.

Now, if Hessie had had any worldly experience, or had possessed any prudence or foresight, she would have forborne to give this suggestion of his any denial, and, without committing herself, would have managed, by the exercise of a little tact, to make him soon take his departure with no more than the ordinary interest awakened by the contemplation of an unusually pretty girl.

But Hessie had not been endowed with any cautious qualities, and she had had no experience of the world to bring their worth home to her;



besides, she never could resist an opportunity of exciting admiration and interest. If she had not been essentially romantic and wilful, she would never have found herself in the position in which she then stood; for wiser heads than hers had considered the possible dangers to which she was exposing herself, and had vainly tried to avert them by a little timely advice.

With smiling lips she said the words which led to this little village tragedy.

- "This house is mine, and I live here quite alone."
- "Alone!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible?" And then, in a very gentle tone: "Have you lost your parents?"
  - "Yes."
  - "Long ago?"
- "Mother died three years ago. Father—only last year."

The pretty lips drooped, and the brilliant eyes grew dim, at the remembrance.

- "No brothers or sisters?" he softly asked.
- She shook the wealth-crowned head.
- " Have you no relatives at all, then?"
- " None."
- "But surely," he persisted eagerly—for the thought of this guileless little life left thus unprotected touched him—"surely you have friends who would be glad to live with you, or give you a home?"

"Oh yes," returned Hessie, quickly. "Everyone is kind to me. I had many such offers when father died. But I preferred to live alone. You see, when you're used to being alone and free as I have been ever since mother died, for father was always very busy at The Hall, you don't settle down so easily with other people. I was afraid."

"I understand. But I wonder you are not afraid now to live so unprotected."

"What should I fear?" she asked, with a sunny smile. "There is nothing about my poor little home to attract thieves—and nobody bears me any ill-will."

"I should think not! And this is a quiet spot. Still, you never know what may happen—and you are so innocent and helpless. It is not wise."

"So they all declared," said Hessie, poutingly.

"But I had a romantic fancy (Hessie's little head swarmed with romantic fancies gleaned from sensational fiction) to try a life of absolute self-dependence — and I like it!" she added, somewhat defiantly.

"Really? You are marvellously self-reliant for one so young. Might I ask your age?"

" Eighteen."

"And do you carry your independence so far as to take all the cares of your home on your own shoulders?" he queried, glancing an instant at her plump, work-roughened little hands.

"Yes," she answered merrily. "Did you think I kept servants? I have always been used to work, and I enjoy it. Father was only the head-gardener at The Hall."

But she said it proudly, too.

"And he left you this pretty home, and enough, I suppose, to enable you to remain your own mistress," her visitor pleasantly hinted.

"Yes. He left me this home—it's not much, but it's very comfortable, and very dear to me—and he also left me enough to keep me from working."

How artlessly frank and winning she was! He was growing wonderfully interested in her.

"Will you tell me your name?" he asked eagerly.

"Hessie-or rather Hester-Lane."

"Well, Hessie—I suppose I may call you Hessie, I'm old enough to be your father—you'll get married some day, no doubt."

Hessie's colour deepened and her eyes fell, and her hands began to play nervously with the folds of her dress.

He persisted mischievously, his eyes bent on the conscious little face.

"Has anyone won you yet, Hessie?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly, her head still drooping, her hands still busy, "I've promised to marry Tom Mason, the blacksmith, four months hence."

"Tom Mason is a very lucky fellow."

Hessie thought so too; and, although she did not say so, the complacent little smile her face wore as she looked up coyly at her guest showed her entire concurrence.

Then silence fell upon them again. The stranger's eyes wandered into the distance while he mused over this refreshingly novel little creature; and, meantime, Hessie studied him with interest. He looked very comfortable and lazy, and she began to wonder how long he was going to remain. Suddenly, their eyes met. Hessie coloured painfully, and began to feel the silence oppressive.

"Do you know," she said, hurriedly speaking of what was uppermost in her mind, "it's a tremendous novelty to me to be talking to a strange gentleman. I've never been away from this little village where I was born. I've never had any other acquaintances but the village folks and my friend, Miss White."

"Never been away from this village!" he exclaimed. "You amaze me!"

She laughed merrily.

"You speak very well, Hessie—not like such of your villagers as I've run across. From whom did you receive your schooling?"

"We have a very good school in the village," she said, with some pride, and taking great pains with her much-prized superiority of speech and

tone. "Miss White, the schoolmistress, is an accomplished lady. She took the post because she wanted to lead a quiet life. I was a regular pupil of hers for ten years. I only left when mother died. Father was most anxious that I should receive a good education."

"He was no doubt very proud of his daughter."

"Yes," said Hessie, softly, her face saddening at the remembrance. "He cherished many grand schemes for my future."

"Won't you tell me what they were?" he pleaded, when he found that she was not going to continue the subject. "Pray do!"

"Well," said Hessie, blushing brilliantly, "for one thing, we were to live as sparingly as possible that he might save a large sum of money. He cherished this idea from the time I was five years old, and, always thinking of it, he never spent an idle moment. Then, when a certain sum was saved and my education was finished, he was to take me to London, and get me-by some means or other-into good society. In his belief that I would make a grand marriage, he even had me taught accomplishments. He said such marriages had often occurred before-and why not again, and to me? And he used to tell me"-Hessie's voice had a ring of pride in it—" that he knew I did not belong to the sphere of life in which I had been born. Poor father!"

So there had been a pair of romanticists! The stranger's eyes were resting on the fair face and comely figure before him; the gentle, musical voice was yet ringing in his ears; and, in his heart, he did not doubt that the simple villager's ambition had seen this little village queen decked in shimmering robes and glittering jewels, with perhaps—who knows?—a prefix to her name.

"Pray tell me more of yourself," he said earnestly. "I am more interested in you than I can say, Hessie. I'm awfully sorry I never wandered in this direction before; we might have been firm friends by now. I suppose you were a promising pupil of Miss White's. What accomplishments did she teach you?"

Hessie felt keenly flattered by this interest she had excited. It would have been hard to say which of the two was enjoying the little adventure most.

"Miss White took the greatest pains with me," she said, looking shyly away, "and I tried to show my gratitude. She is a good musician, and taught me to play and sing. It sounds ridiculous in my position, doesn't it? But I really have a good voice. She also taught me French."

"Why, you're quite accomplished," he said admiringly. "Miss White has been a good friend to you."

"The best and kindest of friends," said Hessie,

looking at him earnestly. "She gives me music and singing lessons for nothing now, and lets me get all the benefit I can out of her library. I often spend delightful evenings with her, and learn how things should be. When father died she wanted to adopt me. She still takes the greatest interest in me, and is the only real friend I have. I don't care for the village people," she added proudly.

"Except Tom Mason," he gravely remarked. Hessie turned crimson.

"Except him, of course," she said coldly.

"No," he said reflectively, "I don't see that you can have much in common with the village folks. But I have asked no end of questions about you, Hessie, and have told you nothing of myself. That's scarcely fair, is it?"

She laughed and blushed nervously.

"Suppose — suppose you tell me something now?" she faltered shyly.

"I will. To begin with, my name is Richard Attwood, and I am a cynical old bachelor of thirty-eight. I live at The Hall at Denton (about twenty miles from here) with my parents and sisters. I have nothing to do, and all day to do it in; and I have wandered all over the world in search of—pleasure! That's as much, I think, as I can tell you of myself."

Oh! the hopeless bitterness that careless speech expressed in tone and glance. It chilled Hessie's

young enthusiasm: she was silent, and gazed into the distance thoughtfully.

"My account of myself seems to have sobered you, Hessie," he said, with a forced laugh. "What are you thinking of?"

She looked at him gravely.

"The Hall at Denton," she said, "means, I suppose, a fine mansion in a large and beautiful park; 'nothing to do'—plenty of money, no duties of any sort; 'wandering all over the world'—no ties, delightful freedom. It sounds well—most enviable!—and yet, Mr Attwood, you spoke very bitterly?"

"I will tell you why," he said, the impulse to tell this simple little creature of his troubles overmastering him; and all the disappointment, all the weariness of his life came out in his voice. "I find no pleasure in existence, because I am a middle-aged worldling—and I have not yet met the woman of my dreams!"

Hessie's coquettish shyness was forgotten now; her kind little heart was touched. She leaned forward, and boldly laid her hand on his arm.

"Find her!" she said, looking up at him bravely. He looked down at the little hand on his arm.

"I'm too tired now," he said.

Hessie drew back from him in silence. She clasped her hands across her knees, and once

again her gaze wandered far away into the distance.

"You will find her," she said dreamily—"some day."

"God grant it!"

An interval of silence followed. He broke it.

"How fragrant this honeysuckle is!" he irrelevantly observed.

"Yes. The place is called Honeysuckle Cottage."

"A very suitable name," he returned absently. And then he said suddenly: "I wonder whether you would grant me this favour. I should so much like to hear you sing."

"Yes," she said brightly. "Come into the house."

What touching confidence! He rose with alacrity and followed her: he was very anxious to see the inside. The front door opened into a little square parlour, tastefully furnished in cheap basket work. A dark blue drugget covered the floor; the spotless muslin curtains were looped back with dark blue ribbons; and the cushions of the chairs were covered with prettily flowered cretonne to match. There was a door opposite the one by which they had entered, on one side of which were some shelves filled with books, and beneath them a table with work-basket and writing materials; and on the other side, the fire-place, hidden by a pretty paper screen. On the draped

mantelshelf was a handsome brass clock, which Hessie informed her guest was a gift from Tom. A large china lamp stood on a diminutive species of sideboard against one of the side walls, and opposite it was a cosily cushioned sofa. Across one of the front corners of the room was a neat cottage piano and a little music-stand—both given to Hessie by her good friend, Miss White, soon after the latter had discovered her pupil's talent and had heard that the enthusiastic gardener was going to try to afford her one. Opposite, a quaint little staircase, neatly carpeted, led to the floor above. The small square centre table was covered by a dark blue cloth, and enlivened by a vase of flowers; the window-sills were filled with brightly flowering plants; the quietly papered walls exhibited a few pictures nicely framed—also presents from Miss White. Richard Attwood's expressive look of pleased surprise as he swept the room in one comprehensive glance thrilled Hessie's little heart with gratified pride. It was, on the whole, as much out of keeping with the conventional idea of the interior of a gardener's cottage as Hessie was herself with the conventional idea of a gardener's daughter.

"What a dear little room!" he exclaimed warmly. "It has not always been like this, I know. I am sure you have made it so since you were free to follow your own tastes."



Hessie smiled expressively, and, opening the second door, beckoned to him to follow. It led into the kitchen. Everything here was also as clean and tidy, as bright and pretty as hands could make it.

She opened the back door, and showed him a flourishing kitchen-garden. A magnificent mastiff lay before his kennel by the side of the door. He rose and greeted his mistress affectionately; and then he eyed the visitor doubtfully, and sniffed suspiciously at him.

"You have a noble champion here," the latter said, laying his hand fearlessly on the dog's great head.

"Yes," said Hessie, with a pang of self-reproach.

"And I said I was alone! How ungrateful of me! He is the best and staunchest of friends, and doesn't deserve to be forgotten for an instant."

And she sat on the doorstep, and, drawing the dog's head into her lap, laid her face lovingly against it.

"What do you call him?"

"Guardian. Tom gave him to me soon after father died. There, Guardy, go to sleep again, old boy!" So saying, she kissed him and put him from her, and rising, led the way back to the parlour.

"The cottage has four rooms," she said. "There are two upstairs."

"Everything is charming," he declared enthusi-

astically. "I am full of admiration and astonishment. To think that all this is the unaided work of your wonderful little fingers."

She laughed, and seated herself at the piano, and ran her fingers carelessly over the keys.

He took a chair near the music-stand and looked the songs over.

"You have a nice collection," he said.

"Miss White gave them all to me," returned Hessie, holding out her hand for one. "Which shall I sing?"

He selected "Beauty's Eyes"; and settled himself back in his chair with, it must be confessed, some doubt as to his enjoyment of the next few minutes. He was truly musical himself, and consequently sensitively impatient of all mediocrity. But his doubts fled at the sound of the first notes.

It was a soprano voice—powerful, sympathetic, and delightfully clear. The song came to an end before he had found his way out of the maze of bewilderment into which it had cast him. He was therefore silent. But Hessie, after one swift, apprehensive glance at him, understood and appreciated his silence. She closed the piano, and put the music away. Then she turned to him.

"Come!" she said shyly. "Shall we go back to the porch? It is pleasanter there than here."

He rose and followed her. They resumed their places on the step.

"Thank you," he said at length. "I adore music, and you have given me a treat. I have heard some of the best too, and am somewhat of a judge—but I never heard that song better sung. You might have given me some more, Hessie."

"I am glad you are pleased," she said simply, her face glowing under the exultation his words called forth.

He suddenly leaned forward and touched one of the little hands as they lay clasped together in her lap.

"Hessie," he said very gravely, "do you know that you are beautiful?"

The embarrassment such a question naturally created was increased tenfold by the grave tone of the inquiry and by his steady and searching glance; but the sacredness of truth had been early instilled into Hessie, and too carefully cherished in her pliable childhood for it not to be a part of her nature now.

"Yes," she said at length, with pitiable distress.
"I—I suppose so. People have said kind things."

He went on mercilessly, "Do you know that you are talented?"

"Ves."

"If you were introduced into the fashionable world, do you think you would shine there, Hessie?" There was pathos in his voice.

"Yes," she said faintly. "I believe I would."

Hessie's colour had faded, and her eyes were cast down while these questions were going on, and he had gently kept his touch upon her hand.

"Now, Hessie, with that knowledge in your heart, don't you sometimes feel this place—too small for you?"

"Perhaps I used to," she said slowly,—"but not now, not now!"

And as she spoke she looked up at him bravely; the colour crept back into her cheeks; and she drew away her hands and clasped them behind her head.

"Why?" he asked swiftly.

"What need has Tom Mason's wife of any worldly experience, of any knowledge of society's ways and accomplishments?" she asked, with a smile.

Richard Attwood thought that, in all his wide experience, it was the sweetest smile he had ever seen light up a woman's face.

"So the end of all your father's and your own ambition; the end of all your united pains; the end of all the wonderful success that has attended his and your hopes and efforts"—and in spite of himself there was a ring of enthusiasm in his tones—"is, that you marry a blacksmith—a village blacksmith!"

"You do not know his worth," she said quickly.

"I have weighed all these things in the balance, and found them wanting."

Richard Attwood's gaze was one of wondrous kindness now, and his face began to brighten with a long-abandoned hope which, under the influence of her sweet presence, was rising steadily in his barren heart.

#### CHAPTER II

#### HESSIE'S GUEST

"I have set my life upon a cast,
And I will stand the hazard of the die."

RICHARD ATTWOOD was well born and well educated. On attaining his majority he had come into a fortune which had made him independent for life. He had entered on a life of pleasure with boyish illusions and enthusiasm, and he had left it a weary heart-sick cynic.

His experience of mankind had been peculiarly unfortunate. His disposition was naturally affectionate and dependent, and he began life a young gentleman of elegant leisure, relying entirely on the pleasure and encouragement he could derive from others for the pleasant dissipation of his time. For a while all went well; but he gradually drifted—all unconsciously at first—into a student of human nature in that class of life to which he belonged; and then there came one day an awakening—a rough, fatal awakening



# Hessie's Guest

—his enthusiasm died, and with it all his pleasure and ambition in life.

For he could not turn from the shallow, frivolous crowd and seek consolation in the bosom of his family: when he thought of his family at all it was with a sickening sense of repulsion and despair. A father solely devoted to his own welfare and pleasure, whose dissipations murdered all respect; sisters whose vanity, selfishness, and soulless frivolity dismayed him; a mother—well, she was his mother, and that thought in sealing his lips against any acknowledgment of her cruel shortcomings did not wring his heart the less. As to his making a home of his own, he thought over the women of his acquaintance with a sinking heart of disenchantment and lost hope.

His standard was an exceptionally high one, and in measuring people against it he showed no mercy; and so, although he yearned with all his soul to be a proud, young husband, and to draw about him a large circle of congenial friends, when he could find neither wife nor friends sufficiently worthy, he would not bring himself to put up with his fellow-sinners.

In his bitter disappointment, he retired for a time from the gay world, and lived like a hermit within his ancestral halls; and, during his seclusion, he gave himself up entirely to morbid brooding.

Perhaps what embittered him most was the

shattering of his woman-ideal—that woman of whose incorruptible honour and fidelity poets and novelists so persistently sung. It was robbing life of all its bloom to deny her existence, and yet he was gradually forced to regard her as a myth. He had seen so many apparent queens descend from their thrones when temptation assailed them that he began to believe the so-called ideal woman was a woman who had never been tempted to swerve from the path of duty—that she could be lured from it by artful appeals to her vanity and selfishness he did not much doubt. How often had his soul sickened at the sight!

But in those days young, healthy blood throbbed through his veins, and the thought of living on contemptuously amongst his fellow-beings, through all the long years that probably lay before him, was appalling. He tried to find consolation in books; but he was constantly reading of that wonderful woman whom, in all his wide experience, he had never met.

The idea of seeking her all the world over gradually took possession of him. His misanthropy struck him one day with sudden terror. Yes, he *must* find her—that beautiful, incorruptible woman! What was life worth without her? Her influence was wanted at every turn. If she could not, or would not, share his fortunes, she could at least give him back some of that

## Hessie's Guest

old enthusiasm which had made life so sweet. Richard Attwood was self-loving above all else; and when he discovered that the existence of this woman was necessary to his welfare and happiness, he began his search for her with characteristic eagerness and recklessness.

The search developed into a monomania, and in his mad pursuit of it he did not at first consider others. Yes, he spared no pains; he begrudged no time in seeking the woman of his dreams; he sought her in every class and in every clime; and Fate seemed to have persistently denied her to him. Often he believed her found; but he had had too much worldly experience, he had been too often unexpectedly disenchanted, to accept anything on its apparent worth, and to test her had meant, so far, to bring down his castle in the air. He made use of his wealth and influence in putting these apparent queens to the proof; and no one overhearing his eloquent appeals to their vanity and selfishness would for a moment have dreamed that his soul was crying out against the words he uttered with such apparent sincerity, and that his converts, instead of elating him, caused him the bitterest pangs of disappointment and despair.

And when he had proved their frailty, he could only fly from them in dismay, and he knew very well that they would never again be the same to

those who had formerly loved and trusted them. So much misery was laid to his door that at length he gave up his search, utterly disheartened.

Had chance thrown her across his path now that he was no longer seeking her? Had he found his Dream-Woman in this unique village This gardener's daughter, who cooked her own dinners and scrubbed her own floors. and whose feet had never passed the limits of this innocent little village! And yet, who was educated, even accomplished, and gifted besides with unquestionable beauty and undeniable charm! And although she was by no means unconscious of her merits, Tom Mason had won her for his wife — Tom Mason, who could not possibly sympathise with her intellectually - who would rather (if he were good-natured) tolerate her enjoyment of the education she had received than take any pleasure, or feel any pride, in it-who would only care that his dinners were well-cooked and his floors clean! Was Tom Mason worth the sacrifice? he asked himself. He must certainly see him. Another question occurred to him almost simultaneously, and it stirred his heart strangely. Should he put little Hessie to the proof? the first time he found himself shrinking from the idea in actual pain. As he sat in that shady, fragrant porch, enjoying her innocent hospitality, with Nature's calm beauty all about him, it was

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somehow borne clearly in on his mind that nothing could justify his disturbing the peaceful tenour of this little village maiden's way. He had never felt like this before, and he hastily began to argue himself out of a mood he considered dangerous to his interests.

She was so exceptional that he felt almost sure of her; the knowledge that she was sterling would prove a balm which would heal all his old wounds. There was Elysium in the thought. Then, too, how interesting and encouraging it would be to watch her pass through the ordeal unscathed! would benefit them all. She would be the nobler for it; Tom would be all the prouder of her; and he-ah! there were no words in which to describe what the result would mean to him. thoughts ran, and doomed Hessie to his friendship in their course. Yes, doomed her - although in her utter artlessness and defencelessness she appealed to him as no woman had appealed to him yet.

But in spite of his strenuous efforts to control them, his thoughts would go on and speculate on the consequences of her proving no stronger than the rest. She would unquestionably be ostracised by these simple honest villagers in whose eyes her defection would be a crime. Hessie was proud, too—she would leave the place, and face the world alone. Alone? So young and fair and helpless!

What would the remembrance of her in this vine-covered cottage, happy and irreproachable, be to him then? He shuddered involuntarily and turned pale—so pale that Hessie, who had been watching him and wondering at his silent abstraction, became alarmed.

"I am afraid you have greatly overtired yourself," she said gently. "You look so very pale! Do you feel badly?"

"No, no, Hessie! Your kind hospitality has refreshed me, and I must be off. But, Hessie, promise me never to receive another stranger so confidingly!"

"Was it wrong?" she asked, abashed.

"It was a risk," he said gravely. "However, I don't suppose you see many strangers."

He drew out his watch and looked at it as she shook her head; the fleeting time amazed him.

"I am so much obliged to you, Hessie," he said earnestly, as he rose. "But I am afraid I've imposed on your good-nature."

"Not at all," she returned, rising in her turn.
"I've—I've enjoyed your visit."

She felt quite flustered by her boldness.

"It's very kind of you to say so," he returned quickly. And then he added very eagerly:

"I shall often explore this neighbourhood—may I come and see you again?"

### Hessie's Guest

"Yes," she said timidly, with downcast eyes.

"Thank you: I shall look forward to it. A bientot, then," and he held out his hand.

As she gave him hers, she looked up at him with a half-proud, half-troubled smile.

" Au revoir," she said.

A young man suddenly turned the corner of the lane which ran on one side of the house, and, gazing on the pair in blank astonishment, slowly approached the cottage gate.

Hessie's softly uttered "Tom!" was not necessary to tell Richard Attwood who it was. "A blacksmith—every inch of him!" he thought, as his eyes fell on the airy dress and magnificent muscular development of the tall, well-proportioned figure. It was a handsome face too—clean-shaven and regular; the curly brown hair was not unlike Hessie's own, but the eyes were blue, and there was something impressive in their clear, steadfast gaze. Tom Mason could hold his own. That was very evident.

Hessie ran down to the gate to meet him, and her guest calmly followed her. The blacksmith lifted his cap as he bent over the gate to kiss her; and then he looked scrutinisingly at her visitor.

"This gentleman is Mr Attwood from The Hall at Denton," Hessie said, laying an appealing little hand on the blacksmith's mighty arm.

Tom Mason touched his cap; Richard Attwood

raised his, and seized the opportunity of explaining his presence.

"I rather overdid it on that machine this afternoon," he said, pointing to the bicycle and addressing himself quietly to Tom. "I got so exhausted and thirsty, that when I sighted this charming cottage, I was tempted into begging for water and permission to rest a while in that delightfully shady porch."

"It was unfortunate that you should have chosen this place—considering the circumstances," Tom gravely remarked.

"Might have been," corrected the other, with a smile. "Miss Lane has read me truly, and we are going to be good friends, I trust. We have made a promising beginning by exchanging confidences—I was naturally much interested, and led up to it. Truly, I have had a singularly pleasant adventure—a most novel one, world-weary man that I am!"

Tom Mason pushed open the gate, and drew Hessie's arm through his, and held the little hand closely between his own.

"She is very young, sir," he said, and there was something in his voice, something in his honest, tender eyes as they rested on the pliable little beauty at his side that went straight to Richard Attwood's heart—"far too young and childish to live alone. But I shall soon be spared all anxiety on that account."

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"So she has told me," Richard Attwood frankly returned. "You have my heartiest congratulations," and he held out his hand.

"Thank you, sir," said Tom, respectfully, taking the proffered hand. "Yes, I'm a very lucky fellow, and, please God, I'll make her happy."

"I am sure you will. Have you and Hessie known each other long, may I ask?"

"I should think so, sir. We were school-fellows at Miss White's for many long years, weren't we, Hess?" the blacksmith returned, gazing down on her proudly. "I was a big boy of eleven when she came there a baby of five. My mother had the same fancy for having me well educated that her father had. It was a terrible blow to her hopes when, on my father's death, I decided to follow his calling. But—bless her dear heart—I'm not fit for anything better, though she thinks differently. Well, I took Hessie under my wing from the first, and we've been sweethearts ever since. But I only got her promise about three months before her father died. And she's made me wait, hasn't she?"

Richard Attwood smiled on the pair benignly, and then he addressed himself with winning frankness to Tom.

"Come, Tom!" he said. "I am an idle, lonely old bachelor, embittered by too much worldly experience. I have no calls on me in any way, and

I seldom find anything to interest me and help while away a few of the long, sad hours. If you will pardon me saying so, I have found something to call forth both interest and admiration in meeting little Hessie and yourself — and it's a very pleasant feeling, very! I could often say, with Portia, but with a difference (I suppose you've read of Portia, Hessie?)—

'Alack, my big body is aweary of this great world.'

Will you take pity on me? Will you let me keep up this chance acquaintanceship? I think you would both find me a useful friend—it wouldn't be my fault if you didn't. And I should find great pleasure—pray believe me!—great pleasure and profit in your society. If I had only dreamt what was to be found in this secluded village, I should have explored it long ago."

Perhaps Tom, in the midst of his amazement at this extraordinary speech—somehow it did not seem so very strange to Hessie—noticed, for the first time, that there were many lines of silver in the stranger's hair and that his face was sad and careworn. At any rate, it was in quite a different tone from that in which he had as yet spoken that he said:—

"I am naturally surprised that you should care to make friends of us—so far removed from you in station and education, sir. But we can only feel proud of your notice."



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"Then it's a compact, and I may come and see you as often as I like," cried Richard Attwood, gaily.

"Yes, sir," said Tom, slowly. "And it's also in the compact that we don't forget each other's station and what's due to it. You'll call at the forge, of course, and I'll fetch Hessie if you want to see her."

" All right, my honest fellow!"

"I've come to fetch you now, Hess," Tom continued. "Mother isn't very well—it's nothing serious—but I thought you might be some help to her."

"Let us go at once," said Hessie, hastily withdrawing her hand and passing through the gate. Tom drew back to let her visitor pass out, and then followed him.

"Good-bye for the present, then," Richard Attwood said, as he prepared to mount.

Tom touched his cap, and Hessie smiled her adieu.

He soon spun past them.

"One more trial — crowned — perhaps! — by success," his thoughts ran, as he flew over the ground. "Hessie must prove her worth to that noble fellow and to me. If she falls, she will never be his Hessie nor my ideal Hessie again—never, ah, never! But she shall be my fallen Hessie for all that. Yes, if you are not more genuine than

the others, Hessie, and your world casts you off, I will not leave you defenceless. You are so peculiarly situated, Hessie—so beautiful, so winning, so unsophisticated, and — for all your vaunted friends!-so utterly alone. You will find that out soon enough, my Hessie, if you step off your honevsuckle throne. Under these circumstances, I should have no right to try my experiment, and to run the risk of exposing your helpless, orphaned existence to so much danger, if I meant to desert you, Hessie. But if you are left on my hands, abandoned, I'll marry you - poor little child! -what matters my future now? my life has been wasted-and give you just that affection your beauty calls forth and just that protection your Nothing more, nothing helplessness demands, more! You would not deserve any more from me then. But if you give me back my Dream-Woman, dear, you will have no more ardent admirer, no truer friend than the man who tempted you so mercilessly. Oh, Hessie! all my youthful dreams are shattered, and I am all aweary of my life; be kind to me, you village flower-let me dream again!"



#### CHAPTER III

#### THE THIN EDGE OF THE WEDGE

"All things are ready, if our minds be so!"

FROM the date of that idle visit to the little village, Richard Attwood's time no longer hung heavily on his hands. Its charmingly-unexpected results refreshed him, and supplied his mind with food for several days. He gloried in the knowledge that he had found something to interest and employ him for some time to come; for he felt convinced that if Hessie were capable of being lured away at all, it would not be without the exercise of great ingenuity and patience on his part. Perhaps—God grant it!—he had found the Dream-Woman who was to make his life sweet again.

The days which intervened between his first and second visit he spent in carefully drawing his conclusions as to the character and disposition of Hessie and her stalwart lover from what he knew of them, and in giving all the circumstances due consideration. The result of his reflections

was that he decided to arrange his plan of attack as follows:

Step the first—to gain Tom Mason's implicit confidence; step the second—to paint the world, of which he was so heartily sick, in glowing colours to Hessie's inexperienced eyes; step the third—to convince her that it would lie at her feet if she would but give her beauty and voice the opportunity of diffusing their charm; step the fourth—to impress her with the idea that, under any circumstances, his regard for her and his devotion to her interests were unchangeable.

True, the gardener must have pursued pretty much the same course with her, and, although he had unquestionably roused her vanity and ambition, she had not allowed either to sway her destiny. That thought returned to him with as much pleasure as when it had burst on him in the porch of the Honeysuckle Cottage—so much so that the question of accepting her on this simple testimony, and so hushing all his old doubts to rest, actually arose in his mind.

But no. He restlessly dismissed the idea. How could he feel sure that the gardener's efforts had been sufficiently skilful and persevering to justify him in coming to such a conclusion? He would accept his Dream-Woman on no other authority save his own; and his carefully thought-



out course of action came back to him with a strangely powerful fascination.

His resolution once taken, he did not allow any remembrance of the two simple villagers to deter or even much to disturb him. He recalled the fact that Hessie and Tom had both touched him with some surprise and a faint, passing uneasiness. It would not do for it to occur again, of course. He did not experience any difficulty in turning the key on all thought of others; for Nature had oiled the lock well in endowing him with a superabundance of selfishness, and it turned easily.

So he forgot that Hessie's life—so sinless and unprotected—appealed to all men of honour; he forgot that honest Tom's happiness was at stake; he forgot everything and everybody but himself and his jaundiced hobby.

The little village nestled in the depths of a pretty hilly country, and boasted of many exceedingly picturesque points of view. Richard Attwood was an artist of no mean merit, and it occurred to him that it would suit his purpose admirably to feign an enthusiastic desire to sketch some of those lovely spots of which he had heard. Of course, being utterly ignorant of that part of the country, a guide would be necessary, and Tom in that capacity exactly met his views. It was certainly the most natural, and, at the same

time, the most effective means at hand of paving the way to the realisation of the first step in his design—the securing of Tom's confidence.

But, then, there was always the provoking possibility to be considered of Tom's being too much engaged to spare the time, and Hessie was not to be thought of yet. He felt that the success of his plot depended on his carrying it out to the letter. Well, he must trust that chance would sometimes favour him; and so, within a week of his former visit, he mounted his bicycle early one bright afternoon, and sped away in the direction of the little village.

He inquired his way to the forge, and found Tom there hard at work. The blacksmith touched his cap, and came out smilingly, as he caught sight of him, and, taking charge of the machine, carefully disposed of it.

"Well, Tom!" cried his visitor, cordially extending his hand. "How are you?"

"Pretty well, thank you, sir," replied Tom, carefully wiping his hand on his apron before venturing to meet the advance.

"And Hessie?"

"She's all right, thank you, sir. She's spending the day with mother, who isn't quite well yet."

"No? I'm sorry to hear that. Well, you see, Tom, I couldn't keep away very long; I hope you're as glad to see me as I am to see you."



"You're very kind, sir; I'm sure you're as welcome as can be."

"That's good! Are you very busy just now, Tom?"

"Well, sir, I've some jobs on hand which must be finished at once, and they'll keep me busy about an hour. After that I can leave my'prentice in charge. What can I do for you, sir?"

"There are some views in this neighbourhood, Tom," Richard Attwood pursued, "which I want to sketch; and I thought perhaps — when you could spare the time—you would not mind being my guide. The place I want to tackle to-day is called, I believe, Glen Valley, and is about three miles from here, isn't it? Yes. Well, it's a lovely afternoon for a walk, and it will be a good chance of bettering our acquaintance. What say you?"

"I shall be very glad to go with you, sir, if you don't mind waiting for me."

"Oh, I'll wait with the greatest pleasure."

"Will you come into the house, then, sir? The forge isn't a pleasant place in this weather."

"But shan't I disturb your mother, Tom?"

"Oh, no, sir. She gets all her rough work done in the mornings. She's heard all about you, and will be glad to see you, I know."

The house adjoined the forge. It was about the same size, and built pretty much on the same

plan as the Honeysuckle Cottage. Guardian sat in the doorway, and he greeted Tom affectionately, and tolerated the visitor.

The little sitting-room into which Tom ushered his guest was furnished in keeping with its humble occupants, but it was comfortable withal, and refreshingly clean and neat. There were books here too, for Tom was a reader in his way. In a chair by one of the windows sat an elderly woman, neatly dressed in black, and opposite her sat Hessie in the blue gingham gown, with a happy light in her wonderful eyes, and the roses glowing on her cheeks and lips. Both were knitting. The instant they entered, Hessie's eyes met Richard Attwood's in silent greeting.

"This is Mr Attwood, mother," Tom announced, with some pride.

Mrs Mason rose hastily, and came hurriedly forwards. "You're very welcome, sir," she said, curtseying. "This is an honour, indeed!"

"Not at all, Mrs Mason," he responded heartily. "I am much obliged to you for your kind reception. But pray, don't let my presence interfere with you in any way, or I shall feel that I am intrusive, and I do so want to be friends with you all."

"You are very, very kind, sir," she returned, "and we feel it."

"Well, Hessie!" he cried, extending his hand.



Hessie now came shyly forward and put her hand in his.

"Mr Attwood will wait here until I'm at liberty to show him the way to Glen Valley, mother," Tom observed.

"Yes," added their visitor, completing the explanation. "I am anxious to make some sketches of it."

"Won't you sit down, sir?" said Mrs Mason, drawing forward the most comfortable chair the room afforded.

"Thank you—if you're quite sure I'm not in the way."

"Hessie and I are only idling over our knitting," returned Mrs Mason, smilingly, "and we'll be glad of your company, sir."

The three then seated themselves; and Tom, who had lingered until he was satisfied that his guest was comfortably established, vanished. Hessie and her future mother-in-law resumed their knitting, and Richard Attwood exerted himself to make an agreeable impression.

"You have, of course, heard of my chance meeting with Hessie and your son, Mrs Mason," he began; "and I am sure you were not surprised to hear that I was so impressed by both that I begged to be allowed to keep up the acquaintance, and that I trust we shall become good friends."

"I think I was surprised, sir," said Mrs Mason,

looking keenly at him. "Hessie and Tom are very wonderful in their old mother's eyes, of course, and I think it only natural that everyone who meets them should be pleased with them; but that you should want to make *friends* of them does astonish me!"

Good reasoning underlay her simple words; her face was very expressive of her perplexity and her doubt of his motive; and both words and glance were directed with that insight which experienced maturity acquires, straight at his weakest point. He began to think that Mrs Mason was going to prove the most formidable of the trio.

With the object of gaining a little time in which to arrange his form of appeal to her, he now merely threw in a conciliatory "Indeed!" with the hope that she would pursue the theme. Mrs Mason went on shrewdly:

"Before I married Tom's father, sir, I was lady's-maid in just a house as I suppose The Hall at Denton is, and one learns not a little of the ways of the people of quality in that position. I shouldn't have thought you would have even remembered Hessie and Tom after you got home; the time of people in your station seems to be always pleasantly occupied."

He was ready for her this time.

"Perhaps I am an exception, Mrs Mason," he returned. "I know I have lost my taste for the

pleasures and customs of my station—all interest even in the people. I have longed to associate myself with a totally different mode of life—more simple, more natural. But I could not find exactly what I wanted until some lucky chance led me to this place. The result is, I am charmed, completely charmed—a delightfully novel feeling to me now, I assure you, for, for years, I have been dull and lonely."

"Dull and lonely, sir!"

"Yes, Mrs Mason, dull and lonely. In our family we don't think much of each other, or feel any real concern for each other; we are always polite, of course, and in society we exhibit a well-bred interest. That's all."

"Dear me!" said the kind-hearted, genial woman, looking at him in a puzzled, troubled way. "And whose fault is it—if I may ask?"

"I don't think I know, Mrs Mason."

"But your friends, sir?" she said kindly.
"Surely, you have lots of friends?"

"I ceased to take any interest in them long ago."

"Dear, dear!" was all Mrs Mason could say in reply, but she was touched by the desolation his words revealed, and showed it.

He had been too much occupied in studying the benevolent face opposite him to watch Hessie very closely; he looked at her now. Her eyes were

resting on him pityingly; they fell as they met his grateful gaze, and her colour rose.

"But I mean to be a good friend to you all, Mrs Mason," he said earnestly, as he turned once more towards her, "if you will only allow me to. And you won't steel your heart against a lonely old bachelor, whose gloomy, profitless life you will brighten by good-naturedly allowing him to pursue his—whim, if you choose to call it so—unopposed. Now, will you?"

Mrs Mason became conscious that her perplexity and doubts were receding shamefacedly under his frank words and pleading gaze. Tom's version of the stranger's explanation and appeal to him had failed to satisfy her, although she had refrained from expressing any opinion. She had secretly looked forward to the opportunity of judging him for herself, and, now that it was come, she found herself—for all her prudent resolves—just as incapable of resisting the fascination of his manner as Tom had declared himself to be.

"Oh, sir!" she said, in a touched voice. "We can only thank you, and hope to deserve your notice."

"Now that warms my heart! But enough of my miserable self. I vote we change the subject."

And so, while he waited for Tom, he chatted away to them with wonderful ease and charm. He gave them brilliant descriptions of the world of

which one, at least, of them knew so little, and both listened with breathless interest; he told them of some of his amusing experiences, and the little room rang with their laughter; he narrated some pathetic incidents, and their eyes were full of tears. When Tom at length joined them, there they sat, close together, the most congenial of friends,

He set off with Tom at once, Guardian accompanying, and in excellent spirits the pair wended their way through the lovely woodlands. With marvellous insight and patience, Richard Attwood made himself master as well of this new position.

Now, Tom, in speculating on the forthcoming walk during the interval of work which had followed the visitor's advent, had, it must be owned, rather dreaded the time to be spent, unsupported, in such vastly superior company. But, somehow, his uneasiness vanished when he found himself in the presence of his guest. Richard Attwood possessed the rare gift of being able to banish all restraint, let the circumstances be what they may; and he exercised it to perfection. He proved, much to Tom's surprise and delight, a most agreeable campanion: he instructed, amused, and touched Tom in turn, and the blacksmith's interest did not for a moment flag.

Glen Valley was at length reached. The artist chose his spot, and, finding a suitable seat in a large

flat stone, drew a sketch-book from his capacious breast-pocket, and began his work boldly.

Tom, with Guardian reposing at his feet, sat on the soft grass beside him, nursing his knees and watching the progress of the sketching attentively.

When one sketch was deemed sufficiently well indicated, it was abandoned to be finished at the artist's leisure, and, with a slight change of position, another point of view was attacked. It was while working on the fourth and last sketch he intended to make that afternoon that Richard Attwood skilfully led Tom into talking of himself, and the conclusion of Tom's simple narrative drew from him the following remark:

"Ah, Tom! You are a most enviable fellow—youth, health, enthusiasm, and no remembrance of a single disappointment to embitter your enjoyment of life. To a worn-out old worldling like me, you are a most refreshing study. I don't believe, Tom, if you had the power to alter circumstances at will, that there is a single one connected with you, you would have changed. I wonder how many men could say the same?"

"I don't think I can say it either, sir," returned Tom, pensively—"at least, not quite honestly. But I am very happy, and not ungrateful, I hope, for all my good fortune."

Richard Attwood suddenly paused in his drawing, and looked down at Tom in astonishment

and with no little curiosity; but Tom's eyes had wandered far away to where the clear blue sky, flecked here and there with snow-white clouds, seemed to meet the rich green of the surrounding country, and he was too much wrapped up in his own reflections to be sensible of his friend's inquiring gaze.

"Why, Tom," the latter cried, laying a hand on his shoulder. "You puzzle me!"

Tom looked up at him with a start and a deepening of the healthy colour in his handsome face; but he was silent.

"Well, well," returned the other, resuming his work, "I have no right to expect to receive your confidence so early, but you will learn to trust me some day, Tom, I hope."

Tom felt reproached. His respect for the cultured intellect and great experience of this man so many years his senior, his pleasurable pride in the knowledge that this vastly superior being had humbly sued for his friendship, all inspired his confidence and appealed to him to speak out frankly.

"If I've held back from telling you my thoughts, sir," he said, "it's not because I don't trust you, but because I know you won't think any the better of me for knowing them. I hate myself for ever giving way to such thoughts; but sometimes, sir, I can't help thinking that it would have

been better for us all if Hessie had been left to grow up—what she was born—a simple village maid."

Richard Attwood's skilled hand began to waver in its strokes; he bent lower over his drawing; he could not bear to meet the earnest face—the earnest words were quite enough for him.

"But you have been exceptionally educated yourself, Tom," he said. "You are well matched."

"You're mistaken, sir; I've only had a longer schooling than most blacksmiths have—that's all. I've not been taught as she's been taught, and if I had been. I couldn't have learnt as she has learnt." What could Richard Attwood say? helplessly silent. "I'm not complaining of her, mind, sir," Tom went on quickly. "I'm as proud of her learning and as pleased with it as the finest gentleman in the land could be. And I wouldn't have her different now-I have learnt to love it all too well! But sometimes, sir, a feeling comes over me that if she had been left to grow up like other village maids it would have been best. think, in the beginning, I would have willed it so if I'd had the power. I should have loved her iust the same."

Richard Attwood closed his sketch-book and put it away.

"It's all right, Tom, my good fellow!" he said, as he gave the blacksmith a friendly slap on the



shoulder. "She has not been spoiled for her position in life. There's a good deal of common sense in that pretty head of hers, and it has prevented such a likely consequence. I shall dance at your wedding before very long—you see, I am counting on being asked—and afterwards I'll peep in occasionally on your wedded bliss."

"And we'll make you right welcome, sir," said Tom, as they both rose and began to retrace their steps.

On their return, they found the little table in the sitting-room covered with a snowy cloth, on which was set forth home-made bread, butter, and jam, and some tempting little cakes of Hessie's own making. Mrs Mason, with many misgivings as to the propriety of her conduct, shyly invited their guest to partake of their humble fare. The heartiness with which he accepted the invitation soon put them all at their ease. Hessie went into the kitchen and made the tea. She came back, with the teapot in one hand and a jug of cream in the other. Tom and his guest placed chairs round the table, and all four sat amicably down.

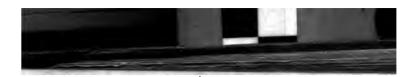
During the meal, Richard Attwood exhibited the most gratifying interest in the daily occupations, the associates, and hopes of his humble friends; he praised the bread and butter, jam and cakes, all of which he partook with unaffected relish, and complimented Mrs Mason and Hessie on their

culinary abilities; he declared that he had never tasted a more delicious cup of tea or spent a pleasanter afternoon; and so ably did he exert himself that, while they enjoyed the simple fare, his entertainers chatted away to him unconstrainedly.

A little while after tea, when everything had been cleared away and there was a lull in the conversation, Hessie, at his earnest request, sang to them. There was no piano here, but Hessie's voice lost none of its charm on that account, and her small audience of three made up in keenness of enjoyment and in enthusiasm for its deficiency in numbers.

When Richard Attwood at length rose to go, the object of his visit was accomplished: they looked on him as a friend—an honoured, trusted, welcome friend. He saw it in Mrs Mason's expressive face as he bade her good-bye and thanked her for her hospitality, expressing, at the same time, a hope that she would soon be quite herself again; he heard it in her voice when she said a few grateful words in reply. It struck him, too, in Hessie's glorious eyes as they met his and she frankly gave him her hand; and when Tom said at parting, "We shall look forward to your next visit, sir," he felt that he had played his cards well.

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs Mason when they were once more alone, and there was genuine com-



passion in her tone. "He must lead a miserable life for him to take up with such as us."

And when she fell asleep that night, she dreamt that the stranger had gracefully departed this life, after bequeathing to her son and his bonnie betrothed everything of which he died possessed. And in the morning the remembrance of her dream was strong within her, and it quickened the beat of her motherly heart; and as she went about her work, she murmured more than once: "What if it should come true? Oh, what if it should come true!" He pleasantly disturbed Tom's usually sound test, too; but Hessie's night was dreamless. The dreams were to come later.

#### CHAPTER IV

#### WIDENING THE BREACH

"Thy actions to thy words accord."

THE success which had attended his first steps in the pursuance of his schemes kept Richard Attwood elated for days. He so dreaded to spoil the good impression he had made that he let nearly a fortnight slip away in meditating over his next visit; but he sent work to the forge, presents of fruit to Mrs Mason, and some rare plants to Hessie for her garden. They expressed their grateful sense of his kindness by the messenger, Collins, his confidential valet, whom he had commissioned to drive over to the little village with his gifts. This man was singularly attached to his gloomy, taciturn master.

When Richard Attwood at length presented himself at the forge, he was conscious of feeling positively nervous over this second meeting with his simple dupes. But the cordiality of his reception left nothing to be desired. He had ventured to



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bring a substantial present for each: a nice shawl for Mrs Mason, a book for Hessie, and a beautiful little fox-terrier for Tom — whose partiality for animals he had discovered during his preceding visit.

These gifts, each of which filled the eye of the happy recipient, were presented with a gentle reminder of the pleasure he derived in making them as a plea for their tolerance, and altogether with so much tact and grace, that they caused no embarrassment, and were accepted with simple gratitude.

Tom had fetched Hessie from the Honeysuckle Cottage, and now all four were once more seated in Mrs Mason's humble parlour. A neat dog-cart stood imposingly before the little cottage gate; their visitor had foregone the pleasures of cycling, and had driven himself over that he might bring his presents.

Tom was gently stroking the fox-terrier's graceful head as it sat upon his knee.

"What shall we call him?" he asked, meeting Richard Attwood's gaze.

"Call him Filos, which means in Italian faithful," was the rejoinder. "He shall plead my cause with you in the event of your ever feeling inclined to forget our compact."

Tom smiled.

"There's no danger of that, sir," he said quietly.

Hessie, seated apart at the open window, scanning the pages of her book, and all unconscious that she was being slyly watched, frequently raised her head to glance wistfully at the smart trap and handsome steed. She could not help thinking how delightful it would be to take a spin through the woodlands in just such an equipage on this warm, bright afternoon. Mr Attwood, unobtrusively studying her, quickly read her thoughts—perhaps because his own tended that way—and he determined to make an effort to gratify them.

"What glorious weather we are having!" he observed. "I declare it's a sin to remain in-doors unless you're obliged to. Come, Tom! Help me persuade your mother and Hessie to come for a spin behind Tilden. I can be on the lookout for more views to sketch, for you will know the prettiest roads."

He felt compelled to include Mrs Mason in the invitation, although he had no hope or wish that she would accept.

She thanked him, and hurriedly excused herself, saying, with a smile, that an arm-chair was more attractive to an old woman; and then she looked doubtfully at Tom and Hessie.

They met her glance with a reflection of her uneasiness, qualified by a strong feeling of regret. But that the honour of driving out with Richard Attwood, Esq., was likely to be attended with un-



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pleasant notoriety to one of the party could not be denied. Tom, in his capacity of guide, might go with impunity; but Hessie was better at home. Thus their minds ran in unison—Hessie's not a little rebelliously—while the Tempter looked anxiously on.

Tom delicately hinted the situation to him.

"Nonsense!" was the short, sharp response.

"The villagers must learn to understand our frendship sooner or later—and why not sooner?"

Tom did not immediately reply. He hated to disappoint Hessie, who was clearly eager for the proposed excursion, and he was unwilling to imply any doubt of his new-found friend; but, for all that, he was uneasily thoughtful over their agreement, and for the first time. For the first time he asked himself, "What will people say of it?" and the answers that question suggested were very disturbing. Gossip mattered little to him personally; but he looked at Hessie—at beautiful, winsome Hessie, between whose personality and surroundings there was so much incongruity—and there was a faint stirring at his heart.

Ah, well! He was not going to repulse their kind friend for so light a cause, but he did not succeed in contemptuously dismissing his thoughts before they had planted their sting.

"Well, Tom! Still doubtful? See Filos is licking your hand!"

The eyes of the two met. Yes, it was but a moment ago that Tom had gently resented the suggestion of there ever being any necessity for such a plea, and lo! while he was repudiating it the time had been so near that it was with them now.

"No," he said stoutly. "There's no doubt in my heart. If you can face idle gossip for the sake of our society, sir, why should we—decidedly the ones benefited—be afraid of it?"

"Ah," was the response, "I taught myself, years and years ago, to be impervious to the opinion of others; but I doubt that you are so hardened. And perhaps, Tom, I am more independent of it than you are. I would not injure you for the world! It is not too late, if on reconsideration you regret our compact, for you to give me the goby. Think again."

The words were genuinely meant, for somehow the circumstances seemed to lift Richard Attwood out of his usual narrow groove and compel him, against his will, to be truthful and generous. And while Tom—little dreaming it—held the disposal of the future in his own hands, his patron studied him curiously, with a troubled brow.

During the momentary pause which ensued, Hessie's heart throbbed painfully, and she turned away her face to hide its sudden paleness. Was Tom going to shut out of their obscure, monotonous lives this unprecedented ray of romance,

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bringing with it such a fund of interest and benefits innumerable? But no! It was a master-stroke on Richard Attwood's part, although he had not meant it to be so. Tom rose to the occasion, and declined to shake himself free of the net which was gradually closing round him. The colour stole back into Hessie's cheeks as his words fell upon her ear.

- "I have decided once and for all, sir," he said.
- "And your decision is?" the words came swiftly.
- "That Hessie and I gratefully accept your offer of a drive."

Richard Attwood extended his hand with a relieved face, and Tom took it cordially. That silent grasp assured his guest, as no words could have done, that Tom's confidence was won.

That drive was a grand success. The little hitch which had preceded it but served to enhance the pleasure it afforded to all parties. Two good hours passed before the smart trap once more drew up before the blacksmith's humble dwelling, and its occupants entered it with light hearts and smiling faces. Richard Attwood took his leave almost immediately, although they all expressed disappointment at his not honouring them by re-But he thought it politic not maining longer. to make all his visits as lengthy as his first had been, so he pleaded an engagement, and drove away.

And so time passed lightly and happily on, brightened for the three principal actors in this little village tragedy by the sweet labour—so skilfully and confidently pursued — of building castles in the air. The haggard, spiritless aspect Richard Attwood's face had worn gradually gave place to the signs of returning mental and physical vigour. His family and friends were moved to a lazy curiosity concerning the change, but he kept them imperturbably in the dark—he and his faithful servant Collins. He was resolved that he should be the only serpent in that peaceful little Eden.

One afternoon, when he presented himself at the forge, Tom proved to be very busy. After a few commonplaces had been exchanged between them, the blacksmith said, with a meaning smile:

"If you want to see Hessie, I'm afraid you'll have to fetch her this time yourself, sir. I can't leave the forge."

This evidence of Tom's confidence, which he thus delicately displayed, was gratifying in the extreme to Richard Attwood; but he only observed, with unfailing policy:

"Perhaps my visits do not always occur at convenient times, Tom; and I want you to be quite frank with me, and tell me when this is so. I shall feel so much easier about them if you will. Shall I depart now, and run over some other afternoon?"

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"Not unless you want to, sir. You're always welcome. Wouldn't you care to fetch Hessie, and go in and have a chat with mother? They'd feel honoured, I know; and I might be able to look in on you now and then."

Tom spoke almost wistfully.

- "Do you really mean it, Tom?"
- "Certainly, sir."
- "Very well, then; I will."

And without waiting a moment more, Richard Attwood set off exultantly for the Honeysuckle Cottage.

This trust promised to afford him an opportunity he had been eagerly looking forward to, *i.e.*, an opportunity of holding another *tête-à-tête* with Hessie.

But he was destined to be disappointed: Hessie was not alone. She was standing in the porch, with her back towards him, talking to a lady of a very striking appearance. They were too deeply absorbed in their conversation to notice his approach. The opening of the gate was the first sound which roused them to a sense of his presence.

Hessie, after greeting him shyly, confusedly presented him to—Miss White. He would have better understood Hessie's disconcertion had he been aware of the fact that he had formed the topic of their conversation, and that Miss White

had been chiding Hessie for her forwardness, and expressing her entire disapproval of the whole affair.

He was prepared to meet in Miss White a lady of exceptional gifts and charm, and in this he was not disappointed. He stood in the presence of a tall, slender, graceful woman of about fifty years of age, with a pale, clear-cut face, surmounted by a quantity of silvery white hair. Her large dark eyes in the clear humidity of their brightness, and her figure in its uprightness and grace of carriage, rivalled a young girl's. She was very plainly dressed, but there was that unmistakable air of distinction about her so difficult to define. She must have been singularly beautiful in her girlhood; for even now, as she stood before him, long robbed by time of the roundness and warm colouring of youth, she was still a lovely woman.

Listening to the sweet, refined tones of her voice in the few words she exchanged with him after their introduction, he found himself trying to solve the riddle of her long seclusion in that retired spot. What kind of a romance was it which was hidden in this little village in the person of this charming woman?

She soon took leave of Hessie; and as she turned towards Richard Attwood, she said, quietly:

"I hear you have taken a great interest in our little village, Mr Attwood; and I have been thinking that, perhaps, you would like to see its school.

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I am very proud of it, and of my pupils too. I think I may say that I have improved both at the cost of some pains and a little outlay. I ought to have accomplished something, for all my interest has been centred in the work for many, many years. Would you care to come with me now—it is not very far—and let me have the benefit of your opinion?"

It was plain to both that she was desirous of speaking to him alone. He answered readily:

"I will come with you now, Miss White, with the greatest pleasure. Let me deliver my message, though. Hessie, they would like to see you at the forge; Tom was too busy to come himself, so I volunteered to be his messenger. I will join you there."

Hessie nodded with a troubled face, and they left her immediately.

Richard Attwood walked silently beside Miss White for some moments, waiting for her to speak. Apparently she found it difficult to express herself, for she was temporarily mute, too, and paced slowly along with a perplexed face and downcast eyes. Suddenly she looked up at him keenly, and said abruptly:

"Don't you think—considering all the circumstances—that it would be kinder in you, Mr Attwood, to spare these simple people the honour of your friendship? I do not mean that you should

deny them any benefits your interest and generosity may incline you to confer on them," she added hastily; "but I do mean that I think it would be best for you to confine yourself to such demonstrations of your regard for them, and to an occasional personal communication with them. I see grave objections to your—pardon me—extraordinary idea of making personal friends of them."

"Why?" he asked coldly.

He was not in the smallest degree disconcerted by her plain speaking; he knew instinctively, when she requested him to accompany her, what it was she was desirous of saying to him, and somehow he felt far more confident of maintaining his acquired callous self-possession in the presence of this refined gentlewoman, who commanded his admiration and esteem, than he did in the society of the unsophisticated blacksmith and the two guileless women who constituted his world. viction that the unsensitive shell of cynicism with which his worldly experiences had encrusted him would be proof against any appeal this woman might make to him stole over him with satisfaction, although the remembrance that it had not always proved invulnerable to the addresses of the lowly gardener's daughter and her still more lowly lover returned to him again with the old faint tinge of uneasiness and wonder.

Miss White felt repulsed and annoyed by his

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manner, and the chill foreboding of coming disappointment began to creep over her. But she was strong in her sense of the wisdom and rectitude of her self-imposed task, and she went on with it bravely.

"Why?" she echoed warmly. "Why, don't you see that it exposes them to painful misconstruction amongst their own class? Already a hail of slander has assailed them. If you take such an interest in them, surely you will see the prudence of putting a stop to this."

"I don't see why I should allow the senseless chattering of these village idiots to interfere with my harmless pleasure," he returned composedly. "It is *their* place to put a stop to it—if they shrink from it. They can do so by a word to me."

"They are too artlessly honest and too grateful to you to be able to see the policy of it," she said despairingly.

"Well, Miss White, I think they show their sense in that."

"Perhaps you will admit, Mr Attwood," she retorted with spirit, "that it is very difficult—well-nigh impossible—for poor men to get on in life without receiving some goodwill from the world."

" I suppose it is," he said carelessly.

"Well, these village idiots, as you term them, constitute *their* world."

He was silent.

"I am an old woman," she went on gravely, "and perhaps my experience has been as wide and as deep as your own. I see food for much injurious and painful scandal in the fact that Hessie is an unusually attractive, endearing girl, who, with all the follies of youth vigorous within her—intensified by her having been educated far beyond her station—is practically without any supervision, and that you are not yet a middle-aged man. I am unwilling to offend you, Mr Attwood: I am quite ready to believe that your motives now are irreproachable—but I earnestly beg you to amuse yourself in some other way."

His face flushed, and he bit his lip angrily to repress the hasty words that rose rebelliously within him. This woman's clear-sightedness and terseness of speech irritated him almost beyond endurance, and roused all the dogged obstinacy of his nature. He determined to be a match for her. He waited until he had himself sufficiently under control to be able to speak calmly; and meanwhile his companion studied him intently with a face of pitiful anxiety.

"I am afraid you are a pessimist, Miss White," he at length observed, evasively.

"I am what my worldly experiences have made me!" she cried, with a sudden outburst of passion. "Hessie and Tom are the favourite children of my maturity—my heart and mind had lost the vacillation and the adaptability of youth when

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they taught me to appreciate and to love them. My strongest interests and my warmest affections are irrevocably centred in them. I moulded their minds and character, and I have jealously watched and striven that only the purest sunshine might brighten their obscure lives. If I can possibly help it, Mr Attwood, you shall not thoughtlessly spoil my work!"

He began to feel somewhat dismayed.

"Why not speak to them?" he suggested, not without a good deal of uneasiness. "I cannot honourably withdraw now—things have gone too far—and, to be quite candid with you, Miss White, I would not care to do so. But if you can persuade them to take your view of the situation, they have but to tell me they have done so, and I shall trouble them no more."

"I have tried and failed!" she said bitterly.

A glow of triumph permeated his frame.

"And must I understand that I have failed with you too, Mr Attwood?" she asked appealingly.

"I am afraid you must, Miss White," he returned respectfully. "I will not abridge my friendship for these people—a friendship which I feel I am justified in saying is gratifying to both parties—unless they request me to do so. The village folks will learn their mistake in time, and, meanwhile, I will try to make up to my friends their temporary disapproval."

She sighed and said no more, but her face clouded over, and she walked with a feverishly quickened step.

"You spoke a moment since, Miss White, of Hessie's education being answerable in some measure for her weaknesses," he observed, breaking an awkward silence and gratifying his desire to draw her out on the subject. "Are you not almost entirely responsible for this?"

"Yes, truly I am," she returned wearily. "But a very different future was pictured for her, and I did my best to school her for it that she might meet it with confidence."

"Was it not a blow to your pains when her choice fell on Tom Mason?"

"No! I felt convinced that the earth held no nobler heart than this village blacksmith's, and that there is more happiness to be found in noble hearts than in any other investment in the world."

"And her father came to the same conclusion?"

"Yes. In sketching Hessie's future, he did not give their childish preference for each other any consideration, believing, as we all did, that it would gradually die away, as is usually the case. But, in the end, we only regretted that we had raised a disparity between them by the extra cultivation of Hessie's fertile brain, and had infused in her impressionable nature an ambition that might sleep but would never die."

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His heart-beats quickened and his face grew pale.

"And you feared----?" he said slowly.

"That some day it might cast a shadow over Tom's life."

"Do you doubt her entire loyalty to Tom, then?" he faltered.

"I will be quite frank with you, Mr Attwood," she returned painedly, while her eyes looked steadily into his and the pallor of her face deepened—"I do. I think, if her vanity and ambition were awakened——"

"But," he interrupted, almost fiercely, "her vanity and ambition were being most strongly appealed to at the very time she plighted her troth to Tom."

"True, but there is something about the first lover's declaration which appeals irresistibly to the romantic tendencies of a young girl; but it is an impulsive yielding on her part, and but too often proves a temporary passion."

Was Miss White trying to warn him? He made no reply; he felt chilled and daunted. Was he really wilfully adding another disappointment to the number which weighed so heavily upon him? Surely this testimony—the testimony of the woman who had studied her and trained her from childhood, and who loved her so dearly—was worth listening to?

He walked on with a drooping head, lost in moody meditation, questioning—for the last time he was to question it—the policy of his design.

The decision to abandon it was hanging by the merest thread, when there flashed across his mental vision a picture of the porch of the Honeysuckle Cottage, and of two figures seated on the step—Hessie and himself; and again these words rang musically on his ear and roused his fading enthusiasm; "I have weighed all these things in the balance, and found them wanting."

His waning resolution to persevere with his undertaking returned to him with redoubled vigour. Yes, Hessie should bring her beautiful, inviolable nature home to these village sceptics—and then he would honourably clear himself in their eyes.

He was recalled to outward events by Miss White's coming to a sudden stop, and, looking up, he saw before him a long, low, white building, prettily decorated by creeping vines. Close to it stood a dainty white cottage which seemed to nestle in a bed of flowers; for flowering-vines encircled it, and the little garden, divided from the schoolhouse and the road by a hedge, was gay and fragrant with them.

"What a lovely little spot!" he exclaimed.



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Miss White was pleased. She led the way into the schoolhouse; and, during the visit of inspection, his warm approval of everything—indeed, there was nothing that could possibly be found fault with—somewhat ingratiated him with her. She was further gratified by his begging for leave to look in on her some day during school hours, and she graciously granted him permission to come any day between the hours of nine and twelve, two and four. She sensibly came to the conclusion that, since she was powerless to put a stop to his questionable friendship, it was just as well to keep herself in touch with its growth. She might be able to exercise a wholesome check on it.

On their way out, he spoke of his great appreciation for flowers, and she led him round her enchanting little garden, and gathered him a dainty button-hole. She accompanied him back to the gate, and directed him as to the shortest way to the forge. He held out his hand to her.

"Try to think kindly of me, Miss White," he said humbly, retaining her slender hand in his grasp. "No one prays more earnestly that the lives of your favourite children may be 'peaceful, happy, prosperous' than I do. I am truly sorry to have been obliged to appear ungracious to you to-day. Shall you ever forgive me for it, I wonder?"

The beautiful dark eyes seemed to look into his soul as, gently withdrawing her hand from his, she softly said:

"The future alone can tell."
He raised his cap and hastened away.

#### CHAPTER V

#### SECURING A FIRM FOOTHOLD

"I owe thee much: thou hast deserved from me Far, far beyond what I can ever pay."

THEY were anxiously awaiting him at the forge. Although he said nothing at first of his recent interview with Miss White, beyond remarking that she was a very charming woman and that the school was admirably kept, they knew instinctively what had taken place; and, in their keen regret that his exceptional friendliness and generosity should have been misinterpreted and repelled, they evinced their sense of his condescension more warmly than they had yet done. But they were pained, too, to have called forth Miss White's displeasure; for they were all very grateful to her, and cherished a very deep affection and respect for her. They felt, however, that she was prejudiced in this matter; and their warm, simple hearts rebelled against any reserve towards their admired patron.

These conflicting emotions palpably disturbed them not a little, and they were also harassed by doubt as to the result of the interview. That Richard Attwood's advent did not immediately set this doubt at rest was a great disappointment to them, but they forebore to question him. There was a faint suspicion of restraint in his manner which appealed to them delicately but potently: it urged them to confine themselves to expressing, by the cordiality of their manner, that no distrust of him had been awakened in their breasts.

But it was not until tea was over that Richard Attwood felt assured his repressed manner had weighed their sympathies in his favour, and then he gave them an account of the appeal which had been made to him, suppressing only those portions of it which had alluded particularly to Hessie, and leaving them to suppose that it had been made to him on the general grounds of incongruity and doubtful benefit to all concerned; and he dwelt eloquently on his knowledge of Miss White's appeal to them.

They expressed their regret strongly, and earnestly assured him that their appreciation of his great friendliness remained unchanged by what had taken place; but, at the same time, they spoke pleadingly in Miss White's behalf, and their loyalty to her touched him. They found excuses for her disapproval and distrust—excuses which did not

reflect on their guest—and they urged upon him their conviction that she would soon accept their view of the case.

Then the subject was dismissed, and Hessie roused them from the perplexing reflections with which its discussion had left them by singing to them with surpassing sweetness.

So the afternoon took wings, and Richard Attwood prepared to depart.

Hessie, who had some work on hand at home and who was desirous of finishing it, rose also to return to the Honeysuckle Cottage. Tom was to see her home as usual, and Richard Attwood decided to walk as far with them.

But, just as they were preparing to set off, a job arrived at the forge for Tom which promised to detain him half an hour, so Mr Attwood and Hessie departed without him, the former trundling his bicycle beside him. Richard Attwood looked down on the little figure at his side in its pink cotton dress and plain but vastly becoming headgear, and his steps lagged. This was the opportunity he had patiently waited for, and he determined to get the full benefit of it.

It was just at that time of the close of a summer's day when afternoon merges into evening, and the brilliant sunshine is transformed into a dull, mellow light—a most becoming light, he thought, as he met Hessie's star-like eyes and listened to the

commonplaces that rippled shyly from her rosy lips.

"Hessie," he said, suddenly and impressively, "does the thought never come over you that it is a shame to bury such a voice as yours in this out-of-the-way village?"

She laughed a little nervously, and avoided meeting his glance by gazing wilfully into the distance.

"I haven't thought about it," she said carelessly, believing he was trying to ingratiate himself with her by flattery.

"Have you never thought," he persisted, "that in its proper cultivation and exercise you possess the power to make yourself wealthy and famous?"

Hessie looked up at him quickly, startled by the question, and she was struck by the earnestness of his face.

"No," she said slowly, her colour going and coming, her breath quickening as she studied him. "Father had me taught because it is one of the usual accomplishments of a lady. How do you mean?"

"I mean as a public singer."

"Do you really think my voice good enough for that?" she asked swiftly, a glow of gratification tingling in her veins.

"Unquestionably."

"You must be joking, Mr Attwood!" she cried.

"I was never more serious in my life."

There was a momentary silence: she was wrapt in an exultant reverie; he was tortured by a gnawing doubt.

"Hessie," he burst out, pausing in the lonely road, and laying his hand gravely on her arm, "why shouldn't you think of it?"

The wave of enthusiasm that passed through her, irradiating her lovely, upturned face, brought a strange pang to his heart. But it died away in a moment, and left her pale and depressed.

"Why!" she exclaimed pettishly. "Because I am going to marry Tom Mason, the blacksmith."

"You might earn fame and fortune, and yet marry Tom Mason, the blacksmith," he rejoined calmly, though his heart was throbbing.

"It would be too unsuitable," she said, turning away and trying to still her excitement. "My accomplishments already cause Tom uneasiness; I can see that—for all his loving care."

"Are you sure that his love is more to you than glory and riches?" he asked hoarsely, walking on at her side.

"Why, even if I was quite free," she returned quickly, "your idea would not be carried out. For such a career one must have influence and a certain amount of ready money. I could not manage it if I would."

His heart seemed to be turning to lead as he looked at her with his cruelly-experienced eyes.

"I would supply all deficiencies," he said. The words were almost a moan.

But she was too excited to notice it.

"No, no!" she cried passionately. "Ah, no. It is very, very kind of you to take so much interest in me—but no, oh, no!"

They had reached the Honeysuckle Cottage, and she leaned against the gate, pale and trembling.

Again he studied her intently, and her hysterical rejection of his services awoke no enthusiasm in his soul. He relieved himself of the bicycle by leaning it against the fence, and then he gently took possession of her hands. He felt the task he had set himself was growing more and more cruel to both, but he was resolved that nothing should daunt him now. He would go on with it thoroughly to the bitter—or to the glorious—end.

"If the thought of the obligation oppresses you, you shall pay me all back in the future, Hessie," he said quietly, and he wondered at his self-control; "some day when you have soared far beyond the need of help or countenance."

"I love Tom," she said defiantly, "and I have placed my future in his hands."

"You and Tom know best, no doubt," he returned in the same quiet tone. "My experience says, however, that Tom's welfare cries out for a different wife and yours for a different husband."

These calm words from the keen, experienced

man before her aroused a strange tumult in her breast. But she resolutely withdrew her hands, and half-turned from him disdainfully. The action was her only reply.

As he looked at her now, the old hope came flutteringly back to him. He drew the pink rose-bud Miss White had given him from his coat, and held it out to her.

"Miss White gave me this, Hessie," he said, abruptly changing the subject. "Will you have it?"

She took it with a word of thanks, and held it loosely in her hand, as he well noted. She was quite self-possessed now.

"Good-bye," she said quietly. "Thank you for seeing me home."

They shook hands, and he raised his cap and turned away. He was soon out of sight.

But I don't think he went straight home: for had anyone been prowling about the precincts of the Honeysuckle Cottage when the gloom of the evening deepened, he would have seen a cyclist, marvellously like Richard Attwood, Esq., riding slowly along the road in front of the cottage, his eyes bent keenly on the ground. Clearly he was searching for something. But his actions would have greatly puzzled an on-looker. The something was discovered presently—discovered with a subdued exclamation of pleasure. A little

speck on the roadside—a poor faded flower. But instead of taking possession of this eagerly-sought emblem, the cyclist, after a careful examination of it, gently replaced it on its dusty bed, and sped away homewards with a radiant face.

No, the soil was not fertile, nor—God help her!
—was it quite barren.

And did Richard Attwood not fear that Hessie might betray him to Tom? Not the shadow of such a fear crossed his mind. He had studied mankind too long and too widely to be baffled by this simple village girl. He felt convinced that her vanity was too pleasingly fed, her interest too keenly excited where he was concerned, for her not to shrink from shutting him out of her monotonous life by awakening Tom's distrust. She would reason that she could be loyal to Tom and yet not deny herself the gratification his friendship afforded her. And he was quite right.

Time went irrevocably on, and Richard Attwood's sketches accumulated. Two of the first views he had sketched were delicately finished in water-colours, prettily mounted in gilt frames, and presented to Tom as a souvenir of the occasion. They looked terribly out of place on the rough cottage walls, but Tom hung them there proudly enough. Some others were also tastefully framed and presented to Hessie.

One afternoon, to Hessie's great delight, he

undertook to do Guardian's head in oils for her; and Guardian would come to the forge for the numerous sittings which followed—for Richard Attwood worked slowly, whether by accident or design he himself best knew—and win golden opinions by his patient obedience, while his little mistress, the artist, Mrs Mason—and sometimes Tom, too—would chat merrily through the long bright afternoons. Miss White would frequently look in on them when her duties were over, and she made no inharmonious addition to the happy little group.

Apparently she had become reconciled to the state of affairs, as Tom had surmised. villagers, too, seemed to have at length exhausted their malicious tongues on the subject of Richard Attwood, Esq., and his protégés. By the time Guardian's portrait was finished—and an excellent likeness of the noble animal it was—the artist's visits had ceased to excite much comment, and were beginning to be regarded as a matter of course. The discussion of his probable designs had faded as a novelty, since, to the disappointment of many lovers of sensationalism, he failed to supply new food for scandal. So the scandalmongering gradually dwindled away to an occasional murmur of disapproval or a wise shake of the head when the topic was alluded to; and what Richard Attwood had first appeared on the

scene as—i.e., bon ami de la maison—he remained, to all outward appearances, for a considerable time.

The prospect was a cheering one to him about the time of the completion of Guardian's portrait; for everyone seemed to be settling down into his old placid groove, and he was in a fair way to realise his desire of establishing himself as one of the commonplace figures on the scene.

Guardian's portrait, on its completion, was suitably framed by him and hung in a conspicuous place in Hessie's pretty little parlour. Hessie's gratitude was warm, and her joy in the possession of this imperishable presentment of her idolised pet very pleasant to behold.

Richard Attwood next tackled Filos, who proved but an indifferent sitter. He was rarely found in the humour to have his portrait painted; but on being summarily seized and called to order, he would instantly become abjectly submissive, and allow himself to be posed; then, when he thought his meekness had sufficiently disarmed his jailers, he would suddenly bolt into the forge and take refuge with Tom. The little terrier was utterly devoted to Tom, and showed no partiality for any of the others. Tom had become greatly attached to him too, and they were almost inseparable. On entering the forge in pursuit of the truant, Richard Attwood invariably found him crouching indignantly against Tom, licking



his caressing hand. Occasionally, Tom could spare the time to take him on his lap during the sitting, and then Filos' heart would be at rest, and he would distinguish himself as a model dog for the time being. The portrait was at length finished, framed and hung, and took its place amongst Tom's treasures.

In spite of her remonstrances, Mrs Mason's humble larder was systematically inundated with all sorts of delicacies. But Richard Attwood resolutely declared that she would deprive him of the pleasure of sharing their meal so often, unless she allowed him to make up, in this small way, for his ravages on her housekeeping; and far more important tokens of his friendly interest began to show themselves: Tom's business was increasing rapidly: he was able to put a little money by. Tom knew intuitively to whose influence this steady influx of work was due, and, in the fulness of his heart, he would have liked to give vent to his feelings; but Richard Attwood laughingly protested against hearing anything more of gratitude, and Tom's was none the less deep and expressive for being silent.

All this time opportunities for tête-à-têtes with Hessie were not wanting, and, in availing himself of them, Richard Attwood delicately pursued his plans. He would talk to her of all the famous singers he had seen and heard, and his vivid descriptions

and bright anecdotes were always eagerly absorbed. But any direct reference to the possibility of her likewise making a career for herself still called forth alarm and distress, a hurried disavowal, and a change of the subject. And now he began to keep her well supplied with books—the lives of famous songstresses—to her the most entrancing literature in the world. The walls of the Honeysuckle Cottage told no tales, so no one knew with what avidity these books were devoured or what ungovernable enthusiasm they awoke in that innocent, undisciplined breast.

For as she read of those women—even more lowly-born than she-who had sung themselves to the highest pinnacle of fame; who received universal homage—yes, from the humblest subject to the head that wore the crown; who commanded small fortunes for the singing of two or three simple songs; who walked through life on a bed of roses-wealthy, famous, and beloved; the knowledge that she, too, possessed the key to this glorious life and could follow in their ascending footsteps (had he not said so over and over again? And was not his opinion worth having?) would make her blood surge exultantly within her. And she would softly close the book, and, dismissing the present and all its restraints, nestle back in her chair, shut her eyes, and let her mind soar at will.



A series of pictures would pass before her mental vision. She would see herself on the concert-platform, handsomely dressed, singing her way into public favour; she would hear the exhilarating comments of the audience on the marvellous sweetness and power of her voice and on her irresistible grace and beauty.

That picture would fade, and another take its place. She would see herself on that same platform, holding hundreds of hearts in thrall; she would hear the rapturous applause and cheers of the great assembly at the conclusion of her song, and see bouquet after bouquet handed up over the footlights until she seemed smothered in flowers.

Then that picture would give place to one more. She would see herself making her curtsey before royalties, the costly tokens of their appreciation glittering on her fair young bosom and arms; and she would see in a vista the life that lay before her—a life on which neither poverty nor obscurity nor loneliness could henceforth cast a shadow—a life radiant with affluence, distinction, adulation, and love.

A blank would follow the fading of this picture; and then, with a violent start and a piteous shiver, she would awake to the chill present: to the fact that she was sitting in a humble cottage—a little obscure maiden—the betrothed wife of a village blacksmith. And she would look with dim eyes

and a throbbing head at the handsomely bound volume before her, push it irritably away, and, folding her arms on the table, lay her head down wearily upon them; and soon a dull sound of sobbing would break the stillness of the room.

Poor little child! There was no father's hand to support her and lead her with patient firmness along the path of duty; no mother's wondrous love to smooth the way and make it seem fair to her; and proud, wilful Hessie could not bring herself to seek guidance of others—not of Miss White whom she revered, nor of Mrs Mason whom she loved—not even of Tom himself. In her pitiable youth and weakness she fought out the awful battle of Duty versus Self alone.

Sometimes she would be on her little porch when the tempter appeared on his way to the forge, and then he would always dismount for a few moments. On these occasions he would discuss the books with her; and she would tell him how much they interested her, and smilingly declare they had so filled her with a sense of her own hopeless inferiority that she hadn't even the heart to practise. And so, chatting calmly with him, she would fondly believe—poor simple child—that she was keeping him from any knowledge of the awful struggle rending her soul. But he still kept dropping this insidious phrase into her ear: "Were I you, Hessie, I would take my fit place amongst



those stars." And it haunted her by day, and she dreamt of it at night.

And now the time when Hessie had promised to make Tom a happy Benedict was almost upon them. Tom, while fetching her from the Honeysuckle Cottage one afternoon, ventured to remind her of it, and spoke with loving confidence of their future happiness and welfare. It was rather nervously done, because of late Hessie had skilfully avoided the subject, and had swiftly changed the conversation whenever others turned it in that direction; and Tom began to feel faintly uneasy about it.

She tried to do so now. It was all due to shyness and coquetry, no doubt, Tom thought; but the dread that she might endeavour to postpone the marriage moved him to persevere in speaking on the point.

They were strolling leisurely towards the forge. Tom held a clumsy stick in his hand with which he was slashing at the shrubbery by the roadside, and his eyes were bent on his devastating work while he pleaded with Hessie to name the day.

"You've made me wait such a long, long time, Hess," he urged, "and I've been very patient about it. I think I deserve to be rewarded now, dear. If you only knew what the waiting has been to me: how eagerly—for all my saying nothing—I've looked forward to this month—sweet September—

that was to give you to me; how every night, when I lie down to rest, I remember gratefully that there is one day less between me and my happiness, I'm sure you'd set my heart at rest, I love you so dearly, Hessie, and you say you love me. Don't tease me any longer, lassie—name the day now."

There was no answer. Tom looked up quickly, and suddenly paused.

Hessie's face was white, and her hands were tightly clasped together as though she was in pain. As he looked at her, her pale lips parted, but no words issued from them. The pallid suffering face, the blinding tears, the heaving bosom and the clenched hands were his only answer.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "What is the matter with you, Hessie?"

The road was deserted save by themselves. He made her sit by his side on a large flat stone which formed a convenient seat by the roadside, and, putting his strong arms about her, did his best to calm her. Guardian and Filos came running up to find out what was the matter, and Guardian licked the face and hands of his little mistress and whined his sympathy.

Hessie soon mastered her emotion; then she kissed Tom and Guardy, and faltered forth an explanation:

"Don't look so worried, Tom, dear," she said.
"There's nothing serious the matter with me, only

I've not felt quite myself lately. I think my nerves must be a little out of order; I've had one or two attacks like this. Now, Tom, you won't ask me to decide on our wedding-day just now, will you, dear? I must think a little about it—but you shall know soon."

"It shall be in your own time, of course," he returned, soothingly. "But won't you see Dr Gussing about your health, dear?" he added anxiously.

"No, I think not, Tom. I feel sure it will soon pass away. If it doesn't, then I'll see the doctor about it."

She would have risen when she had finished speaking, but Tom detained her.

"One question more, Hess," he said gravely. "Give me both your hands, dear. There! Now, look me straight in the eyes and answer me truly, by all that's most sacred."

The pale, tear-stained face with its wide dim eyes and drooping, crimsoned mouth, was raised wonderingly to his.

"Hessie," he said with gentle seriousness as he gazed wistfully into her upturned face, "are you quite sure that you still love me?"

The unexpected question swiftly recalled the natural colour to her face; but she did not flinch, and her gaze was very earnest as she rejoined instantly:

"Quite sure; I shall love and honour you, Tom, as long as I live."

He kissed her very tenderly, and they at once proceeded to the forge.

The traces of Hessie's recent emotion were at once remarked by Mr Attwood and Mrs Mason, though neither made any comment at the time. But when the former rose to go and Tom walked down to the gate with him, Richard Attwood threw his horse's reins over his arm (he had ridden over that afternoon), and asked Tom to step a little with him.

"What's wrong with Hessie, Tom?" he asked.

Then Tom told him all; and as he talked on in his simple touching fashion, he marvelled at the growing pallor of his companion's face and at his averted eyes. Before he could remark on it, Richard Attwood looked up at him kindly, with his natural colouring restored.

"It will all come right, Tom, my boy," he said, using almost the same words he had used on a former occasion. "Patience!"

Tom held the spirited animal while his patron mounted, and then stood back, touching his cap. And as he watched master and horse disappear in a cloud of dust, he wondered what he had done to deserve such a friend.

The next day, and for many weary days to come, all further thought of the marriage was



banished from their minds: Mrs Mason sickened, and became seriously ill. The village doctor—a corpulent, easy-going, middle-aged man, who had placidly allowed himself to rust in that retired spot which afforded him a sufficient income to gratify all his rural tastes—shook his head over the case; and after one particular visit, gently tried to prepare Tom and Hessie to meet the blow which, to him, seemed inevitable.

Mrs Mason did indeed seem to be sinking under the low fever which had taken possession of her, in spite of his efforts, and of the untiring care of Hessie and a woman from the village.

Richard Attwood was away in London during that first week; and on his return, immediately despatched Collins, well laden with gifts, for news of his friends. Collins returned with the intelligence of Mrs Mason's precarious condition, and his master set off at once for the village.

The forge was closed that no noise might disturb the sick woman—and, indeed, Tom had no heart for work—and the villagers were put to the inconvenience of carrying their work to a neighbouring village some three miles off.

Tom leant on the cottage gate, trying to steel himself to bear his trouble bravely. No lady in the land was more revered and beloved than this humble woman was by Tom, and the few days of her illness had so told upon him that Richard

Attwood was startled by his haggard, spiritless appearance.

Tom greeted him mechanically.

"I was so grieved to hear of it, Tom," Richard Attwood murmured. "I felt I must run over at once. How is she?"

"No better," said Tom, hoarsely.

His visitor tried vainly to comfort him.

"Keep up a good heart, Tom. When things seem darkest, they begin to mend."

"Hope has left me, sir," Tom said dully.

Richard Attwood laid an encouraging hand on the blacksmith's shoulder.

"It will come back," he said.

Presently Richard Attwood left the forge and directed his steps to Dr Gussing's house—a square, staid, red-brick building. As he walked along, he put his hand into his breast-pocket and drew out a small envelope. He took from it three tickets for a concert to be held at a town some sixteen miles away, at which several noted artists were to sing. The tickets were for the following week.

"There is no hurry about this now," he muttered, as he tore them into shreds. "Mrs Mason's illness will indefinitely postpone all further discussion of the marriage."

When he returned to the forge, he had arranged with Dr Gussing for the visit of an eminent London physician, whom he said he would en-

deavour to bring down the next day, and also for the introduction of a trained nurse. He told Tom of this, and Tom felt at a loss how to thank him, and could only wring his hand and repeat the simple, eloquent phrase—"God bless you! God bless you, sir." But Richard Attwood saw no hope was kindled in his breast.

He duly arrived the next day with the eminent physician and the trained nurse in his wake. The London physican had a consultation with the country practitioner; was closeted some time with the patient; took the liberty of changing the treatment; gave full instructions to the nurse; declined to express any opinion as yet; pocketed his fee (which Robert Attwood had ready for him, and which was a large one); and went away, still marvelling that he should be engaged to attend that class of patient. But it was an interesting case, he reflected—very interesting.

It was arranged that he was to come again in a week's time, unless any change for the worst occurred during the interim, in which case he was to be summoned.

Now, whether she would have recovered under any circumstances will never be known, but certain it is that from the date of the London physician's visit the patient began to show signs of improvement. Everyone was firm in the belief that the London doctor had worked the miracle: that

Richard Attwood had saved her life. His popularity was great now; for Mrs Mason was much loved in that village so long her home. And Tom let it be widely known, too, that there was not a single delicacy in the way of nourishment, or a single comfort that their slandered friend, who had already done so much for them, did not provide for her.

The great doctor pronounced her out of danger on his next visit, and in another week the nurse had left: Mrs Mason could now leave her bed.

It was a grand day when she was once more seated in her little parlour, Tom, Hessie, Miss White, Richard Attwood, and one or two more of her particular friends grouped about her. She had herself penned a little note to Mr Attwood, begging him to come and see her on that day. And when he arrived he shared with the invalid the honours of the day: they all wrung him by the hand, Mrs Mason put it to her lips—and they seemed unable to sufficiently express their great thankfulness to him.

He made light of his services, and took his place genially amidst his humble surroundings. He left early, for it was deemed inadvisable that Mrs Mason should exert herself long, and the others had already disappeared.

Tom accompanied him as usual into the road, and held his horse while he mounted. Richard Attwood then leaned forward, and extended his hand. Tom took it and retained it a moment.

"I can't tell you what I feel for you, sir," he said; "but while there's breath in my body, my life is at your service."

The earnestness of Tom's glance, touch, and words sent a keen pang to Richard Attwood's heart and turned him sick and giddy. He swiftly withdrew his hand and averted his face, and he spoke almost harshly:

"I have done nothing to deserve such words from you, Tom," he said. "There, there! Your warm heart exaggerates my slight services."

He touched up his horse and cantered away.

And no presentiment of the time, now rapidly approaching, when he would recall his earnest words with bitter imprecations against the man he now gazed after so reverently came to Tom. On the contrary, tokens of that man's benevolence met him everywhere, and brimmed his heart with joy and gratitude. He entered the forge, and there, lying about, were numerous remunerative jobs awaiting his leisure, that he might feel he was beginning at once to make up for his weeks of weary inaction; the little dog-his gift-in whose faithful, loving companionship Tom had found so much pleasure, crept to his side on the bench on which he had seated himself and licked his face and hands; and best-ah, by far the best of all!when he returned to the little parlour there was his mother's bright face gazing lovingly on him still.

#### CHAPTER VI

#### CLEARING THE WAY

"I charge thee, fling away ambition: By that sin fell the angels."

ONE afternoon, shortly afterwards, Richard Attwood, riding towards the forge, discovered Hessie in her old place on the step of the Honey-suckle Cottage busy over some needlework. He smiled and lifted his cap as their eyes met; and the next instant he had drawn rein, dismounted, and was fastening his horse to the wooden paling.

Hessie watched him open the gate and walk up the little path with a quickening heart; but, as on the occasion of their first encounter, she did not stir to greet him. And yet how different was her motive! Then, she had been too indifferent; now, alas! she felt too much.

He paused before her and held out his hand. She dropped her work just to touch it, and then hurriedly resumed her occupation.

"So you've returned home, Hessie," he remarked,



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as he seated himself at the other end of the step.

"Yes," she replied, her eyes bent on her work.

"Mother is quite herself again, and needs me no longer. I came back two days ago."

"They were reluctant to let you go, I'm sure," he went on idly.

"Yes," she returned. "I'm only at the other end of the village, but still they'll miss seeing me every minute."

"It must be sweet to be so loved," he observed absently.

"It is sweet," she said, with a troubled smile. Silence followed.

Richard Attwood was meditating on the best mode of broaching a subject which had latterly been very prominent in his mind—i.e., to try and induce Hessie, under the guise of painting her portrait for Tom, to grant him those interviews, secure from interruption, necessary for the completion of his design. Those simpletons—Mrs Mason and Tom—would, he knew, discern no impropriety in the proceeding, when, on the presentation of the painting, the matter would be brought before them. And as for Miss White—had he not learnt that he could safely set her at defiance? Having thrown off his mask to Hessie, he knew, of course, that she would see through the subterfuge of the portrait-painting; but he

also knew, from his long and varied experience of women, that the feminine mind involuntarily revolted from naked facts. He must plausibly clothe his petition to present it to her impartially, and how better than in the dress his fertile brain had suggested for it?

But Hessie's troubled, nervous manner was not at all encouraging this afternoon, and he didn't see his way clearly to the introduction of the topic. So he drifted into more commonplaces, and thus unconsciously brought about the desired end with unexpected ease.

"What are you making, Hessie?"

"Embroidering a tobacco-pouch," she said, holding up for his admiration a piece of brown plush delicately embroidered in gold.

"Very choice, indeed. And who is to be the happy recipient?"

" Tom."

"A special gift, Hessie?"

"Yes. To-day week will be his birthday, and I am working him several little things. He appreciates them so."

"Ah!"

Richard Attwood had started eagerly. Could he have desired a better opening? Tom's birthday! The portrait should be done for Tom's birthday. He drew nearer to her.

"Hessie," he said, with animation, "I have long



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wanted to make Tom a certain present, and it will be just splendid if I can manage it in time for his birthday. It is one I know he will prize above all others. But I must have your help."

"What is it?" she asked, with shrinking interest.

"A portrait of you in oils."

She gave a violent start, and, with her work held suspended, looked at him with a face full of uneasy conjecture.

"Pray, let me do it, Hessie!" he continued, pleadingly. "And it must be done in secret, you know. It must come as a great surprise to Tom. That will be the cream of it. You will be able to give me the necessary sittings here, at times when there will be no likelihood of any intrusion. Come, say yes, dear!" and he laid his hand on her arm.

Hessie's work fell into her lap; she trembled, and feverishly pushed her hair from her paling face.

"Do say yes, Hessie!" he persisted. "Why shouldn't you, dear?"

That question decided the matter. No! she could not allow him to think that she was afraid of him or doubtful of herself. She would teach him that she was neither. How weak and silly of her to have shown so much disconcertion! She rapidly stilled the instinctive tumult of apprehension in her breast. She believed—poor, foolish child!—that this man was infatuated with her: hence the

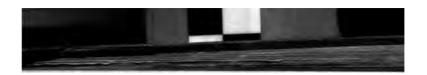
pains he was taking to ingratiate himself with them all. Well, there was no harm in gratifying the pleasure she found in his society while she knew her heart to be steadfast to Tom. And as for the man himself—since he was so dishonourable as to try to fascinate her, knowing that she was betrothed to Tom—well, he deserved to be played with! And, oh! it was so sweet—so intoxicatingly sweet—to listen to his eloquent descriptions of the glorious future he could open to her! And—and surely it was harmless, since she was resolved to regard it all as an impossible dream.

Thus Hessie reasoned; and then she looked up calmly at the handsome face above her, with all her natural colouring and coquettishness returned, and said lightly:

"You quite took my breath away, Mr Attwood, with your grand proposal! It's awfully good of you, and Tom will be delighted. If you can manage to be here in the mornings—so early as between nine and ten—there'll be little fear of any interruption. Can you?"

"My time is yours, Hessie," he said, with an odd ring of disappointment in his voice. "It is sweet of you to be so gracious. Thank you, dear. I will come to-morrow. And now I had better trot on to the forge. I shall see you there later on, I hope."

She nodded; and he went away, limply enough.



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At five minutes to nine the following morning Richard Attwood appeared before the Honeysuckle Cottage. He had ridden over on his bicycle; and, after unstrapping a small square canvas and his paint box from the machine, he placed it in an unobtrusive position at the side of the house.

The sound of his footsteps on the porch brought Hessie from the kitchen, with Guardian at her heels.

After the customary greetings were over, Hessie glanced down doubtfully at her neat morning-dress of lilac cotton, and said shyly:

"What had I better put on, Mr Attwood?" He smiled.

"I shall only do your head and a wee bit of your shoulders, Hessie," he said. "Haven't you got something in the shape of a muslin or lace kerchief? You know what I mean—to fold about the shoulders."

She nodded, and tripped upstairs. Meanwhile, Richard Attwood busied himself in converting one chair into an easel, another into a table for his paints, etc., a third into a throne for Hessie, and in appropriating a comfortable seat for himself. Hessie soon returned with a fichu of filmy white net edged with lace in her hand.

"Will this do?" she asked, shaking out its graceful proportions. "It belonged to Miss White. I admired it, and she insisted on my accepting it. I had given up all thoughts, though," she smilingly

added, "of possible occasions when I might wear it; but perhaps it is going to come in useful after all!"

"It is indeed," he returned, taking it from her.

"It will do admirably. And now, will you sit here,
Hessie?"

"Shall I put on that lace first," she suggested.

"No. Allow me to arrange it."

She bashfully seated herself as he directed, and he fell back a few paces and studied her critically.

"Turn in the collar of your dress, Hessie," he said suddenly.

She hesitated an instant, and then complied with a heightened colour.

He folded the fichu in half, and, approaching her, draped it artistically about her shoulders so that it partly hid, partly revealed the lovely throat. Returning to his seat, he contemplated her from it with professional satisfaction.

"Charming!" he said, and began to busy himself with his palette and paints. With his paint-brush held perpendicularly before his eye, he was taking the relative proportions of her face and daubing them down roughly on the canvas, when Hessie gave a little nervous laugh.

"It's even more trying than I thought it would be," she said.

He was now busily putting in the outlines.

"No, don't say that!" he cried gaily. "Let us



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chat away to each other, and so shut out all embarrassment and weariness."

And he began at once with his usual success, while his thoughts were as follows:

"Tom will soon begin to press his suit again, and she can't decently put him off any longer. I must bring matters to a close—she must have the two futures, in all completeness, laid before her about the same time. I must manage it in these sittings and the concert. Et puis? Oh, Hessie Hessie! That I could find your heart and mind of steel!"

Presently he said aloud:

"I am thinking of running up to London again shortly. I enjoy these London visits as much as I am capable of enjoying anything now. I always stay with an old housekeeper of ours who has a neatly-appointed house in Bayswater. I lost a kind of friend, Hessie, when she married and left us—somehow I was always a great favourite of hers. Her husband died a few years ago, and since then she has augmented her modest income by taking boarders. Excellent board and lodging at a reasonable price; she looks to me—dear old soul!—to advertise her establishment, and I can do so with a clear conscience."

Hessie only said, "Indeed," but a premonition of what was coming made her say it faintly.

"Now, Hessie," he went on gravely, "if you

should ever decide to gratify me and yourself by following up the bent of your genius, there would be a comfortable home ready for you. Mrs Winston is a woman of refinement, and you would find in her the kindest and most judicious of friends. She is ever ready to take the keenest interest in anyone I affect, and, under her hospitable roof, you could pursue your studies undisturbed. You will not forget about her, I hope."

"Where's the use of remembering when my mind is made up?" returned Hessie, coldly.

"Ah, well! We never know what the future may bring forth. Do you know, I have spoken of you to Mrs Winston, and she is most anxious to make your acquaintance and to do all she can for you. She is proud, in anticipation, of being the humble chaperon of a future queen of song; for she believes, Hessie, that you will never bring yourself to hide your gifts for ever in this secluded spot—that you only want a little time to accustom yourself to the naturally startling idea of giving up your familiar little world for a great unknown one. And so think I, Hessie,"

"You are both mistaken, then," she said quickly; but her eyes fell, her colour varied, and her bosom heaved.

"Have you read the last book I sent you, Hessie?"

"Yes."



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"Interesting?" he queried, working steadily away!

"Most." The word broke from her involuntarily.

"I have another one for you, Hessie," he pursued.
"I shall bring it to-morrow."

"No, don't!"

" Why?"

"I—I find they make me neglect my duties," she stammered.

He laughed forcedly.

"I shall bring it, nevertheless," he said. "It is more suited to you than your duties, as you call them! You are too conscientious, Hessie."

"I won't read it," she returned resolutely.

He gave another forced laugh, but there was a flash of pleasure in his eyes.

"We shall see," he said.

And then the subject was changed, and time sped on.

Richard Attwood now showed that he could work with great rapidity if he so chose, for when at the conclusion of a two hours' sitting he released Hessie with thanks, commendation, and the hope that he had not over-tired her, and she approached to inspect the canvas, she was surprised. It was only very roughly done as yet, but still everything was indicated—the billowy dark locks, the large brilliant brown eyes, the small drooping mouth

with its latent suggestion of dimples—even the lilac tint of her dress through the transparent scarf.

"Wonderful!" she said. "Why, it will soon be done!"

And his keen ear detected a shade of regret in the tone of relief with which she spoke.

"Yes," he returned. "Three sittings will finish it."

The canvas and paint-box were then confided to Hessie to be put away carefully, and the artist rose to depart.

"By the way, Hessie," he said, as they shook hands, "I have a friend staying with me at present—a famous musician both vocally and instrumentally, but especially the former. He is a musical enthusiast, and has trained many a now celebrated singer for love—he can afford to do so, for he is enormously wealthy. To-morrow morning he will drive through this village on his way to Lynton to visit friends there, prior to his return to London, and will drop me here. Hessie, I wish you would give me permission to bring him in, and let him hear your voice?"

Hessie did not answer; she was struggling fiercely with herself.

"Ever since I told him about you," Richard Attwood went on suavely, "he has given me no rest on the subject; he is most eager to see and



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hear you. You will like him, I know—and he will be charmed."

The intense craving to hear the great man's opinion carried the day.

"You may bring him if you like," Hessie said vainly, endeavouring to speak carelessly. "I only hope he won't laugh at me."

"No fear of that. Thank you, Hessie." And he took his leave.

Signor Martelli was more than charmed—he was completely fascinated. Although he had entered into the adventure purely to oblige his friend, he quickly found himself deeply and personally interested. What he had agreed, in any event, to say in Richard Attwood's interests, he discovered, to his entire satisfaction, he could say in the interests of truth. After listening to a song, he tried the compass and tested the accuracy of her voice with glee.

"Ah!" he said, in his quaint English, and with his pretty foreign accent. "It is heavenly. True as de steel, clear as de bell, strong as de ocean—an' zo sweet, zo sweet! Signora, I make you my heartfelt compliments; I would be proud to train such a voice only for de luf of it. Yes, yes!—proud, proud! And perhaps you will let me some day, eh? Ah, you will not bury yourself here always. No, no! It would be crime. So see, I beg of you to take my little card, and I will hope

dat when you come to de great London to make yourself famous, you will remember Paulo Martelli—your humble servant." And he bowed low.

Hessie took the card mechanically and thanked him absently. After the first red glow of tingling gratification on hearing the great Maestro express his unmeasured approval had subsided she became far too anxious to see Signor Martelli drive off to be able to enjoy his visit. She was haunted by an undefined fear that the dog-cart before her gate would be observed and she would be called upon to explain the appearance of these two men. Could she do so satisfactorily?—to Miss White's satisfaction?—to Mrs Mason's?—to—to Tom's? She was doubtful of it: she was only too conscious that there was something unworthily secretive about their presence. But—bah!—there was no likelihood of any such occurrence—the cottage was so isolated; and in spite of her vague anxiety to be rid of the little portly musician, with his shock of crimpy grey hair, his great, piercing dark eyes and good-natured mouth with its short, bristly hirsute adornment, she felt subtly drawn to him. His manner was so easily and deferentially courteous—and yet, at the same time, he was so kind and encouraging.

At length he took a graceful leave of her, and was accompanied to the gate by Richard Attwood;



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while Hessie, in making all ready for the sitting, went on with her reflections.

"But the picture!" (She had just placed it on a chair.) "The picture would betray these visits to Miss White, Mrs Mason, and Tom! How would they take them?" For the first time she considered the question from their point of view. Ah, Mrs Mason and Tom would not think gravely of them, she was sure—but Miss White? She thought of her experienced friend with a new, strange sense of uneasiness and irritation.

The makeshift easel, table, throne, and the artist's seat being now all in readiness, she went upstairs to decorate herself as before. On returning to the parlour, she found Richard Attwood seated before the canvas ready to begin.

She was singularly silent, thoughtful, and depressed during that sitting, and Richard Attwood's efforts to rouse her met with but indifferent success. She made only one remark in reference to her recent visitor, and it was this:

"Were I going in for the profession, I should not care to be taught for love."

"Oh, as far as that is concerned," he returned, "professors are usually open to an arrangement whereby they receive a certain percentage of their pupil's income—when she makes a start—until the indebtedness is cleared off."

On leaving, Richard Attwood drew out of the



capacious pocket of his morning-jacket a small square parcel and laid it on the table. Hessie watched him do so, but made no remark.

"For you, Hessie," he said, and the next instant was gone.

Hessie knew what it was—the book he had promised her. Ah, well! he should learn that she had the strength to resist temptation: he should find it to-morrow exactly as he had left it.

But somehow Hessie had but little inclination for her duties that morning. She went about them in a half-hearted way, and finally abandoned her feeble attempts. Saying to herself that she was fatigued by the nervous strain of the long posing, and by the excitement which had preceded it, she seated herself comfortably in her little parlour with some sewing for employment. even her needle lagged. Her eyes would wander to the table and rest on that tempting parcel. She began to feel a burning curiosity concerning the binding of the book. Was it bound in unison with the others? She would so like to know! There could be no harm in ascertaining, and then she would wrap it up again. She took up the parcel, and carefully undid it. Yes, it was just like the others - a handsome dark blue binding with gilt-edged leaves. Then she recalled the fact that the others were illustrated, and her fingers began to flutter the pages. She put the



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book hurriedly from her; then took it up again. No! There could be no harm either in looking at the pictures. She began to do so at once. One interested her indescribably: the desire to read the paragraph referring to it grew and grew until she felt she could resist it no longer. She found the place and began to read defiantly. Then, feeling that she had hopelessly compromised herself, she acknowledged the force of circumstances with a sigh, and, turning to the beginning, nestled cosily back in her chair, and read the whole volume with avidity.

The next morning she was very pale, a repellent light glowed steadily in her eyes, and her manner was sullen. Richard Attwood saw that a storm was brewing. All through that final sitting her dread of being questioned about the book was vivid, but not until he rose to depart did Richard Attwood speak of it. Then Hessie felt she would have given the world to be able to tell him honestly that she had not read it; she would have even liked to have lied about it, but the words faltered on her unskilled tongue.

"I—I have read it—yes!" she stammered, in reply to his question. For a moment she looked at him piteously, then burst into a storm of tears.

"How dare you torture me so!" she cried passionately. "For shame! for shame! Do you know what I've done? I've made a bonfire of

all your beautiful volumes—and I put Signor Martelli's card at the top! And I sat before it—and watched—and watched—until there was nothing left—but a heap of harmless ashes! Go—go! And never come here again! Do you hear me, you coward? Never again! Never again! Ah, shame upon you!"

And with that she fled upstairs and left him.

But, Hessie, you should have stayed—and taken note of his radiant face! You should have stayed and overheard his fervent whisper—"God be thanked!" You should have stayed—and seen him pick up the scarf which had fallen from your shoulders and put it reverently to his lips! Then, perhaps, an inkling of the truth would have dawned upon you, little Hessie, and all danger would have faded to loom no more. You would have become a good man's beloved and happy wife, and a redeemed man's proud and honoured friend.

But Hessie, sobbing out her heart in her little chamber above, was as far away from the truth as ever. When her passion had subsided, she even began to think of her outburst with self-reproach. After all, he had been kind to Mrs Mason and to Tom—wonderfully kind!—whatever his motive. And he had meant to be kind to her too. If she was so despicably weak as to find his mistaken attentions torturing—was he to blame for that?



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She thought of the epithet with which she had spurned him, and was ashamed. It might have justly been applied to her. She would look out for him from the porch every afternoon, and if she ever saw him, she would apologise for her words. She shrank somehow from the thought of writing to him—it would seem to imply the belief that she would see him no more, and she thought of that possibility with inconsistent distress. No, she would only write as a last resort.

Meanwhile, Richard Attwood was wending his way homeward.

"One more trial," he cried exultantly, "and then I'll tempt no more. Just one more ordeal, Hessie, and I'll press you no further. One—only one—thank God, thank God! Then I'll have carried out my plans to the letter—as I vowed I would—and you and I shall be at rest. Yes, you have filled me with hope, God bless you! Oh, my dream-woman—so long and vainly sought!—I begin to feel thy gracious presence near me—at last, at last!"

Early on the afternoon of Tom's birthday, Hessie's vigilant look-out was rewarded by the sight of a familiar and rapidly approaching dog-cart. Richard Attwood was alone, so she found the courage to run out into the road and hail him. She rightly surmised that he was on his way to the forge to present his gift to Tom. The picture

had been fetched away on the evening of its completion by Collins.

He drew up instantly, and greeted her as of old. "Why, I thought you would be spending the day at Mrs Mason's, Hessie," he said.

"I—I had not quite finished Tom's presents last night," she panted; "so I told them they wouldn't see me until the afternoon. I—I want now to beg your pardon for what I said the other day. It—it was horrible of me—after—after all your goodness to us. But I couldn't help it—I felt beside myself. Please forgive and forget my rudeness."

"Pray say no more, Hessie," he entreated shrinkingly. And then he added, with gentle wistfulness:

"Perhaps the time is coming when I shall beg your pardon, child—on my knees."

And raising his cap, he drove away, leaving her amazed.



#### CHAPTER VII

#### A FINAL PREPARATION

"It is the little rift within the lute
That by-and-by will make the music mute,
And, ever widening, slowly silence all."

WHAT words can aptly describe Tom's enchantment on receiving his patron's unexpected birthday gift? To say that he gloated over it would be to put his reception of it but mildly. He thanked the artist in one eloquent flash from his honest eyes and in a hand-grasp that was like a grip of iron.

Mrs Mason stood with Tom before the now richly framed portrait, almost as keenly appreciative of it as Tom himself.

"How sly you have been about it, sir!" she said, glancing up at the uneasy artist. "And that little minx Hessie, too!"

He hastened to explain.

"You see," he said, "we thought for it to come on Tom as a surprise would be *the* great thing, and so we arranged to have the sittings in secret."

"Of course, of course!" cried Tom, still absorbed in his gift.

"And now, Tom, I must be off," his friend continued hastily. "I've just managed to squeeze the time to bring you my little offering and best wishes. I'm due in London to-night."

"Are you?" cried Tom, regretfully. "I'm so sorry—I wish you could have spent a little time with us this afternoon, sir. Hessie will be here directly, and Miss White."

"So am I sorry, Tom—very sorry! But it can't be helped."

"Are you going to make a long stay, sir?" inquired Mrs Mason.

"About a week, I think, Mrs Mason," he returned. "And by the way, Tom," he went on quickly, drawing a small envelope from his breast-pocket and putting it into Tom's hand, "I have two tickets here for a concert to be held at Lynton to-morrow night. I brought them, thinking you and Hessie might care to go. It will be a really splendid concert—the best of the series—Patti, and others of almost equal fame."

Tom's music-loving heart throbbed and his eyes danced.

"It will be a *tremendous* treat to us, sir," he said warmly. "Thanks ever so much. Think of our seeing the great Patti, about whom Miss White is forever talking, mother!"



"Think, indeed!" cried Mrs Mason, looking, in an absent way, at Tom's working attire. "I'm sure Mr Attwood seems bent on giving us every reason to think gratefully of him, doesn't he?"

"I only wish I had a ticket to offer you, Mrs Mason," put in that gentleman gallantly.

"Don't speak of it, sir," she returned. "I'm getting too old for such outings, and much prefer hearing all about them second-hand."

Tom's eyes had followed his mother's when she scanned his attire, and the astute diplomat looking on knew that they were both mentally ransacking Hessie's and Tom's wardrobes in search of garments worthy of such a grand occasion. So he said genially:

"The tickets are not for dress-seats, Tom. I never could enjoy myself 'dressed-up,' and I thought, perhaps, you would sympathise with me. You can see excellently from those seats, and yet you will be able to go comfortably in your ordinary clothes."

Tom's face brightened, and he looked at Richard Attwood very kindly.

- "You think of everything, sir," he murmured.
- "I wish I could join you," was Richard Attwood's response.
  - "I wish you could, sir."

The visitor then glanced at his watch, and declaring he would have to look sharp to catch his train,

took a hasty leave of mother and son, and hurried away.

In due time Miss White made her appearance with a little token of her own handiwork. She was received with that affection and respect always accorded her, and Hessie's absence was explained.

"Tom has just had such a nice present made him, madam," said Mrs Mason, addressing the lady as was her wont. "A most charming surprise to us both!"

"Indeed! I am very pleased to hear it." And then Miss White addressed her former pupil with her sweet smile. "What is it, Tom?" she asked with interest.

Tom turned to a corner of the room where the portrait had been placed out of harm's way, face inward, on a chair until he could make up his mind where it would hang most advantageously; and taking it up carefully, he held it before him like a shield.

"Look!" he said proudly.

Miss White looked — and started; not only started—but turned pale, and glanced from Tom to Mrs Mason in an alarmed and disapproving way.

"Why!" exclaimed the former, puzzled and disappointed. "The picture seems to frighten you, Miss White. I think it a good likeness myself—and the sweetest face in all the world!"



- "You say neither of you knew anything about it until it was presented?" she asked swiftly.
- "Yes," returned Tom, slowly. "We thought the surprise made it all the more pleasant, and they thought so too."
  - "Mr Attwood and Hessie?"
  - "Yes."
  - " Ah!"
- "What is the matter, madam?" cried Mrs Mason.
- "I don't like it at all!" Miss White burst out.

  "He couldn't have painted that picture from memory—I recognise a scarf I gave Hessie, which she never wears: she must have given him the sittings secretly at the Honeysuckle Cottage. Surely you see the impropriety of such a proceeding?"

Mrs Mason and Tom looked at each other blankly.

"It never occurred to either of us, I'm sure, to look on it in that light," Mrs Mason said perturbedly. And then she added, with rapidly returning placidity at the thought:

"Don't forget their ages, madam. She is a mere baby to him."

"Yes," chimed in Tom, impatiently. "He's old enough to be her father!" To Tom's twenty-four summers he was a perfect patriarch.

"You will find that he is neither too old nor is

she too young for the villagers to gossip about them unpleasantly," said Miss White, gravely.

They both looked very worried; but as Tom put the picture back again, he said stoutly:

"I don't believe a soul knows about the sittings but ourselves, and we're going to use our commonsense, I hope. When folks see the picture they won't know but what she sat for it from our midst."

Miss White sighed.

"I only hope you are right, Tom," she said.

"But I should like to give Hessie a little gentle counsel for future guidance. You think with me, I am sure, that it will be as well. She is so young and inexperienced."

They cordially agreed.

"Suppose I lose no time by going to meet her now?" Miss White continued. "She is probably on her way here."

"Do," said both simultaneously; and Tom added, "But don't be hard on her, will you, Miss White?"

"Trust me!" And with that answer she departed.

Miss White met Hessie issuing from the gate of the Honeysuckle Cottage with a little parcel in her hand. Hessie's intuition told her what had happened before Miss White opened her lips, and she was conscious of feeling unduly irritated over the matter.



Miss White kissed her wayward pupil as usual, and taking her arm, walked her slowly in the direction of the forge.

"Hessie," she said quietly, "I have just come from Mrs Mason's, where we have been admiring Mr Attwood's handsome present to Tom. But there is something in connection with it, my child, which I strongly disapprove of; and although the thought never occurred to Mrs Mason or to Tom until I suggested it, they both now heartily agree with me. It is with their full knowledge and consent that I am here to meet you, and to say—what I feel it is my duty to say—at once."

Hessie made no reply.

"Hessie, dear," Miss White continued seriously, "thoughtlessness is the inseparable ally of such innocent youth as yours: it is knowledge of the world, bought by bitter experience, that teaches us foresight and caution—and you have had none! It was very imprudent of you to have granted Mr Attwood those private interviews; and—he, at least, knows the world, and I like him none the better for having suggested such a thing to you—I want you to promise me never to consent to receive him alone again. There are thousands of excuses you might urge—or, if necessary, refuse boldly. He will not think any the less of you for doing so. Do you promise, dear?"

"Yes," said Hessie, listlessly.

"Do you think, Hessie, that any of the villagers got to know of these visits? If so, their scandal-mongering will awaken you all too rudely to the misconstruction to which you have exposed yourself."

"No," murmured Hessie, crimsoning. "I am quite sure no one knows of them but ourselves."

She did not think it necessary to add that Mr Attwood's manner had long ago awakened in her an instinctive knowledge of her danger.

Miss White's troubled face brightened with relief. Hessie went on falteringly!

"Tom is—is not angry with me now, I hope, Miss White?"

"Oh no, dear! He even thought it necessary to beg me to speak to you gently. None of us are unreasonable enough to expect worldly wisdom from you, little girlie."

There was a momentary pause which Miss White broke.

"Hessie," she said abruptly, "when are you going to set our minds at rest by marrying Tom?"

Hessie started and trembled.

"I—I don't know," she stammered in an evasive, troubled way. "He—he has not spoken of it since mother's illness."

They were now close to the forge.

"Come, Hessie dear, brighten up!" cried Miss White kindly, as she inspected the depressed little



face beside her. "I shall be afraid to face Tom, if you look as if I had been scolding you."

Hessie roused herself with a forced laugh, and they entered Mrs Mason's parlour with wellassumed gaiety.

"All the cobwebs are brushed away," said Miss White, addressing Mrs Mason and Tom brightly as soon as the greetings were over; "and now let us enjoy ourselves as of old."

Hessie was not a little relieved to find that Mr Attwood had already departed, and to hear that it was to London. Tom, seated by her on the sofa, where after her loving but timid greeting he had led her, was enthusiastically examining her precious little gifts, pausing every now and then to kiss the soft, flushed face beside him. Meanwhile, Miss White and Mrs Mason were busily laying the teatable with all sorts of dainties in honour of the day. In the centre of it stood the gorgeously iced birthday-cake, which Mrs Mason contemplated as the result of her painstaking with no little pride.

Presently, the lovers were summoned to the table, and the feast was merrily proceeded with. They each seemed successfully to have banished all care, and to be peacefully and happily enjoying the present. The cake was cut by the blushing Hessie—under the customary penalty to which she submitted with grace—and it was pronounced unanimously to be unrivalled. Tom triumphantly

informed Hessie and Miss White of the treat in store for to-morrow, and they all discussed and gloried in the prospect. And so the afternoon harmoniously passed away.

Exhaust its sweetness to the dregs, ye trusting simpletons; it is the very last ye shall so spend together!

Tom escorted Miss White home.

"Tom, dear boy," she said as they walked along, when are you going to be married?"

"Whenever Hessie's ready," he returned. "I spoke to her about it several times before mother's illness, Miss White, but she always seemed to shrink from it. I haven't spoken to her of it since."

"I would do so were I you, Tom," Miss White continued earnestly. "This dawdling is productive of no good. We shall all feel more satisfied when she is your wife."

"I'm sure I'm ready enough," said poor Tom.
"I think I've waited for her with the patience of Job. Oh, Miss White, do use your influence with her to name the day!"

"My dear boy! what is my influence to yours? Hessie only wants to be treated with a little gentle firmness, and you will find her amenable. Why not speak to her to-night? A grand occasion, surely?"

"I will!" he said with eager hopefulness. "And I'll manage to give mother a hint of what's in



the wind, for I know she is impatient for it to come off too."

"That's right. Here we are at home. Goodnight, Tom," drawing him towards her and kissing him; "good-night—and God bless you! I shall expect you to-morrow, with a glowing account of the happiest of all possible closings to your birthnight." And so they parted.

The consequence was that as Tom walked home with Hessie that evening he said tenderly:

"My Hessie, I want you to give me something more before we part to-night. Will you make the fixing of our marriage the crowning happiness of the day?"

As on a former occasion, Hessie, after a faint resistance to the nervous agitation the topic called up, gave way and began to cry. But Tom could not allow himself continually to be put off by her ready tears. They did not disarm him now as they had previously done; they even roused in him a keen sense of irritation. Miss White's hint of "gentle firmness" was very present to him, and he went on with quiet resolution.

"I cannot understand why the subject should upset you so, Hessie. Either you love me, and will tell me at once when you will marry me—or you don't love me, and will let me know now that our marriage can't be. I can't let you play with me any longer, dear."



"It's cruel of you to speak to me so, Tom!" she sobbed. "On this night, too, of all others! You've never treated me like this before. You said, when we last spoke of it, that it should be in my own time."

"A man's patience must come to an end some day, dear," he returned, with the same calm persistence. "I think mine has been wonderful."

Hessie cried on unrestrainedly. The lane was dark, silent, and deserted. Tom put his arm round her, and drew her close to his side, gathering her little hands in one of his.

"Come!" he pleaded. "Don't be a silly little girl. You surprise me, Hessie!—I thought I knew you better than this. You are cruel—to keep me waiting to hear you say (what, of course, you must say) that you love me, and that I may give in our names to-morrow."

He could not see her face, but he felt her distressed breathing, and her hands grow hot and cold in turn.

"Give me till to-morrow night, Tom!" she moaned.

What was the origin of the feeling which now sprang up so powerfully in Tom's breast and passionately urged him to press his question home that night? Thinking of it afterwards, he was inclined to lay it down to instinct.

"Why till to-morrow night?" he asked coldly.



"To—to think it over in," she murmured. "You shall have my answer by then, I promise you."

"You've had (to me) many long, weary months to think it over in, Hessie. I must have your answer to-night." He had never spoken more firmly.

"It is not ready, Tom," she whispered tremblingly.

"But it will be by then. Oh, spare me to-night!"

But Tom stopped, and held her off from him.

"Hessie," he urged reproachfully, "ever since I first knew you—so many years ago—I've given up my will to yours. Won't you make me one little return to-night? Put aside your wilfulness, dear—for it is pure wilfulness which makes you try my patience another twenty-four hours—and tell me what I've waited so long to hear come!"

But Hessie desperately freed herself from his hold, and took refuge in a sudden outburst of temper.

"I won't!" she cried angrily. "Why should I be so tormented? We are at home now. Leave me, Tom!"

And without further adieu she ran into the house. Tom instantly turned on his heel and walked bitterly back to the forge.

But that it would have been a poignant disappointment to Hessie, and have seemed too like a mean revenge, Tom would have begged off the

concert the next day. Hessie's treatment of him the preceding night had affected him deeply; and he lost all pleasure in the once eagerly anticipated event, and found himself shrinking from the hours to be passed alone in Hessie's society with the strange restraint between them of a first quarrel.

Of course, Mrs Mason and Miss White made themselves acquainted with the result of the interview, and, although Tom gave them no details and uttered no complaints, they plainly saw how deeply he was pained; and they let Hessie know of their disapproval by treating her with marked coldness, although, at Tom's earnest request, they forebore to remonstrate with her. But the thrilling and everpresent thought of the concert made Hessie impervious to their shafts and to Tom's evident constraint. She had carried her point, and was going to the concert free of the extra chains with which Tom would have bound her.

Some hours later, sitting with Tom in the brilliantly lighted hall at Lynton, listening, for the first time, to the irresistible singing of the sirens gathered there, she became wrapped in a silent ecstatic reverie. She was not sitting there so plainly gowned amidst the humbler portion of the audience, with this village blacksmith at her side—no! she was in her proper place on the tastefully decorated platform. It was she the handsome accompanist was leading so deferentially to the



front; *she* it was who faced the audience in sheeny satin robes and gleaming diamonds, and acknowledged their enthusiastic reception of her with a graceful curtsey; it was from *her* throat there rose the bell-like notes of surpassing truth and sweetness; and the thunderous applause, the fragrant flowers were all for *her*!

During the concert she did not once speak to Tom; and, when they were proceeding homeward, she only answered his few feeble remarks in monosyllables. She was still lost in her dream. Tom's mind had been occupied too anxiously elsewhere for him to have been able to appreciate the music thoroughly; now and then he had let himself be roused to a moment's inspiration, but, as a rule, he gave the singers but absent attention. And once out of the hall, the concert rapidly began to fade from his thoughts, although, to break an oft-times embarrassing silence, he tried to talk of it. He was too proud to remind Hessie of her promise, but he thought of nothing else. And she—alas!—she had completely forgotten it!

Tom's hopes died with a pang which left him cold and sick as they reached the gate of the Honeysuckle Cottage, and still she gave no signs of speaking. He desperately walked with her to the door and waited for her to open it, that she might have every chance of doing so, but the hint was lost upon her.

She stood within the doorway and dreamily held up her face to be kissed. He had not kissed her on seeing her that morning; and Hessie, with the remembrance of their recent parting and of his proud, sensitive nature then strong within her, had not expected him to. But memory had since then been sung to sleep, and nothing but the echo of the singing played about her sleeping brain. Custom alone still held her in its coils, and so she stood in the doorway and held up her face to be kissed.

"Good-night, Tom," she whispered.

But Tom drew back and looked at her searchingly. And, in spite of himself, these words broke from him:

"Have you nothing further to say to me, Hessie?"

Even that question failed to dissipate her rapturous trance.

" Nothing, I think," she said absently.

"I'll plead with you no more!" he cried bitterly, as he instantly turned and left her.

His abrupt departure gave her a shock; and the shock stilled the lulling music in her ears, and her mind suddenly awoke to a recollection of yesterday, of this morning, and of her broken promise! Poor Tom! Poor patient, generous, noble Tom! She could not let him go home like this! Yet what was she to say? What—oh, what? The struggle which she had thought this evening would be ended either



one way or another was still raging fiercely—more fiercely, perhaps, than ever. Nothing, as yet, warned her which of the two potent passions within her—ambition or love—would prove the stronger. They were pitting their strength against each other as unyieldingly and as mercilessly as ever. She felt, with a dry sob of despair, that she would die if the conflict lasted much longer. No, it was impossible for her to keep her promise; but she could say a kind word to him.

"Tom!" she called softly.

There was no answer.

She ran down to the gate, and leaned over it.

"Tom!" she said again.

Still no answer.

She flew to the corner of the lane and called him once more.

Then he came back to her.

"What is it?" he asked eagerly.

Oh, that she could say the words he wanted! She looked at his happy, expectant face—so clear in the soft moonlight. Her self-possession began to desert her: no ready words would come to her lips.

Still he waited hopefully, looking at her with reawakened tenderness.

"I—I only wanted to tell you good-night, Tom," she said at length, in a piteously uncertain voice.
"You went away so strangely, dear. Won't you

kiss me, Tom? I—I feel so funny to-night, Tom—so weak, and dazed, and lonely!"

Ah, Tom, if you had only kissed her; if you had only taken her lovingly in your strong arms and wiped away her starting tears; if you had only addressed her in the old familiar tender strain, and tried once more to understand and to sympathise with her in her awful need, I think the struggle would have ended then, Tom, to your eternal credit and to hers!

But Tom was still groping in the dark, and he had suffered much, and his patience was at an end. His face darkened at her faltering words, and he spoke with fatal and unconscious cruelty:

"I don't feel I've any right to take your kisses," he said. "You ordered me to leave you last night—I can stand no more—leave me now!"

Hessie felt the repulse to her heart's core; but she left him the instant the words were out of his mouth in proud silence.

And that was the little rift within the lute which by-and-by made all the music mute.



#### CHAPTER VIII

#### THE STORMING OF THE HONEYSUCKLE COTTAGE

"Smooth runs the water, where the brook is deep; And in his simple show he harbours treason. The fox barks not, when he would steal the lamb."

THE week of Richard Attwood's absence was a trying one to Hessie. She did not venture near the forge or Miss White's; and their respective occupants, under the mistaken belief that it was the best mode, as they termed it, of bringing her to her senses, left her severely alone.

Only Tom appeared at the cottage gate night and morning; and, calling her, the following curt dialogue would ensue—she standing in the porch, he at the gate:

- "Is all well with you, Hessie?"
- "Yes, Tom."
- "Good-night or good-morning," as the case might be.

Hessie would respond accordingly, whereupon the blacksmith would immediately vanish.

In this way, Tom, without compromising his dignity, still kept sufficiently in touch with the Honeysuckle Cottage to sleep on the comforting assurance that his lonely, perverse little sweetheart was all right, and to work under the staying knowledge that she was well and needed nothing from them. So these proud, sensitive souls kept apart. Neither would make a decisive step towards a reconciliation, although the estrangement was a martyrdom to both.

Therefore, when Richard Attwood turned up on the very day week of his departure, he found the Honeysuckle Cottage more completely at his mercy than he had found it yet. Hessie did not repulse him as, during Miss White's last talk with her, she had resolved to do—she was too utterly miserable. She welcomed him as a sympathetic friend; asked him into her parlour; and, when they were seated, poured the history of the past week into his ear.

The tempter was startled. Inwardly daunted by Tom's throwing up of the sponge, and painfully apprehensive as to its effect on the ultimate result of the final effort before him, he was, nevertheless, determined not to shirk the eloquent summing-up which was to form the conclusion of his scheme. So, when he had sympathised warmly with Hessie, he produced two letters from his pocket, and, with unfailing tact, said doubtfully:



## Storming of Honeysuckle Cottage

"I have two letters here for you, Hessie. They are from Signor Martelli and Mrs Winston. I know their purport; and therefore I feel a little timid about delivering them, remembering your reception of my last question touching this matter."

But there was no drawing back on Hessie's part now. The opportunity of diverting her mind from the dull aching of her heart by means of this same fascinating subject was very grateful to her. She would have done so before, had she been able to; but the books were all burnt, and thought was so vague and unsatisfying. She stretched out her hand greedily.

"Give them to me," she said.

He obeyed her with a sharp spasm of disappointment. She examined the superscription of each, and then the seals with evident pleasure in their possession; but she seemed in no great hurry to open them.

"Aren't you going to read them now, Hessie?" he forced himself to ask.

"Yes," she smiled, "I'll read them now."

She chose Signor Martelli's to begin with, and was soon lost in its contents.

The letter opened with the declaration that, since he had turned his back on the Honeysuckle Cottage, the remembrance of her had haunted him; it set forth his absolute conviction that fame

and fortune awaited her in the cultivation of her voice; it besought the honour of that task's being confided to his care; it touched delicately on her objection to placing herself under so much obligation as to receive gratuitous instruction—which his esteemed friend, Mr Attwood, had informed him of—and hinted at his consent to the drawing up of a document whereby, when she was once fairly launched on her career, the debt might be gradually diminished, until it existed no more; and it closed by imploring her to lose no time—to come to him at once.

Hessie mused so long over this letter, with her eyes wandering absently over its pages, that Richard Attwood became impatient.

"You seem to have forgotten Mrs Winston's," he said.

She started, and let Signor Martelli's effusion drop into her lap; then she slowly took up the other letter, and, leisurely opening it, gave it her full attention.

Mrs Winston commenced by stating in outline the account she had received from her old master's son of the young lady she now took the liberty of addressing; she went on to declare how much she had since thought of her, and how the more she dwelt on the subject, the more firmly convinced she became that, sooner or later, Miss Lane would come to London to make a name for

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herself; that that belief encouraged her to write to express the double interest she took in Miss Lane—first, as a friend of her dear Mr Richard's; secondly, as a young lady of exceptional gifts and charm—and also her anxiety to be of service to her; and she concluded with the information that she had two communicating rooms on the second floor—one furnished as a sitting-room with a piano, the other as a bedroom—which she would feel proud if Miss Lane would condescend to occupy for the present at least—as a *friend*.

Hessie mused long, too, over this production. At length she let it flutter beside Signor Martelli's in her lap, and, looking up gravely, met Richard Attwood's anxiously searching gaze.

- "You say you know what these letters are about?" she asked.
  - "Yes, Hessie."
  - "And—and you think——" she faltered.
- "That it would be folly in you to let such an opportunity go by. Good heavens! Was ever a girl more fortunate? Everything is made smooth for you."

She paled under the fervour of his words.

"No, not everything," she said slowly. "I should want money to pay my way with; I have not enough at my command. These people"—glancing down at the letters in her lap—"are very kind, but I could not allow them to wait

years for the payment of their services to me. I should feel myself a robber all the time."

He suddenly rose, and hurriedly began to pace the room,

"Hessie!" he cried passionately. "Let me—ah, let me—supply your present needs! I, with so much idle wealth at my command, lying heavily upon my conscience—I, with so little interest in life that I long for kindly death to take me in his arms and hush me to rest. Be kind to me, child! Let me feel myself of some use in this dreary world—give me—ah, give me—a little pleasure in my soured existence. When fame and fortune are your kneeling courtiers—when adulation and eager service follow you, go where you may, let the poor old cynic stand by and say, with the old happy pride of his early days, 'It is my work!'"

How truly he meant those words! Yet how differently from the interpretation naturally placed upon them by the unnerved girl!

Hessie trembled piteously and covered her face with her hands. He halted in his agitated walk; fell on his knees by her chair, and touched her timidly on the arm.

"You don't speak, Hessie!" he cried, in terrible apprehension. "Look up—look up, child—and answer me!"

She let her hands fall heavily into her lap, and raised her pale face.



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"It is all so provoking!" she burst out irritably. "I have money enough to pay my way for a year or so—but I can't use it! My dear father's savings amounted to a little over £500, but he left it in trust for me. It is not to be paid over to me until I am twenty-one—unless I marry."

"Hessie, be generous, and let *me* pay your way!" he pleaded.

She wearily shook her head.

"Then you must at least let me realise your legacy for you. The money is less than nothing to me, and you will be quit of the debt in three short years. Don't wilfully waste the precious time!"

Her heart leaped at his proposal—a leap which sent the blood coursing through her veins at such a rate that her skin was flushed and warm and tingling and she was all animation in an instant. A swift change followed, and she grew pale and cold and still. So her changing face mirrored her changing thoughts, while she continued to gaze down on the kneeling man—now in reckless enthusiasm, now in shrinking awe. It was under this last feeling that she spoke.

"Suppose I fail!" she whispered shiveringly.
"Suppose I fail! I shall have spent my money—lost all my friends. Penniless, friendless, and helpless, I shall stand alone—alone in a great, unknown world!"

"I will never desert you, Hessie," he said heroic-

ally. "Penniless, friendless, and helpless—a castaway in a great unknown world—you shall be my care. But why dwell on such an unlikely thing? Has not the great Martelli assured you of your success? Come! Think of the grand gifts the world holds in store for you—gifts for which men have sacrificed their honour and their lives—gifts which you can easily and honourably win by the simple exercise of the attributes God has bestowed upon you. Don't let the thought of management worry you: my experience will gladly arrange everything for you. You have only to say 'Mr Attwood, I place my future in your hands'—and your part is done. Speak, Hessie."

"Not now—not now," she gasped. "I—I must think. I—I will write to you."

But the thought of prolonged suspense was unendurable to the wretched man.

"No, no!" he urged desperately. "You have had the matter before you long; your mind must be made up one way or the other. Only ask it calmly—and tell me now!"

"I cannot!" she sobbed. "Such an awful step—so uncertain, so utterly selfish, so ungrateful, so *cruel*—and yet so grandly tempting! Oh, I think my heart will break over it!" She hid her face again.

"Hessie, try to decide now, my child! Only try
—I beseech you!"

It was an agonised appeal.



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"Impossible!" she sobbed. "I—I must have more time! Oh, leave me—leave me!"

The interview was strangely recalling her interview with Tom: again she was fighting for time on a matter of grave importance to herself, and of impatient interest to her opponent.

"Don't send me away in suspense!" he cried sharply. "Have you no heart? You shall answer me before I go! Oh, be merciful and speak!"

She looked up, startled by his tone; and the sight of his expressive face stilled her distress, and roused in her an awed curiosity.

"How white—and worn—and ill you—you look!" she stammered.

"Give me your answer now, Hessie!"

"You frighten me, Mr Attwood! You—you look so wild—so fierce!"

She rose quickly, and drew her dress from his clinging hands. But he caught her hands in his; and, as he knelt before her and bent his head over them, the prayer—" Make good my trust!"—went up from his tortured heart. Hessie was now thoroughly alarmed.

"You—you will leave me now, I'm sure," she pleaded tremblingly. "I'm awfully upset—and can talk with you no longer. I—I will let you know my decision soon. In pity—go!"

"When shall I hear from you?" he asked hoarsely, as he rose. "To-morrow?"

"To-morrow! Well—yes." Any concession, she thought desperately, which would free her of him soonest.

- "Without fail?"
- "With-without fail."
- "I shall send Collins over about ten in the morning for your note, then—don't say that will be too early for you!"

Hessie's impatience to be rid of him was too intense to even allow her to protest against this wholesale curtailing of the meagre time he had offered her.

"No," she said hurriedly.

He took her cold, uncertain hands in his and raised them to his lips.

- "Good-bye, then," he said anxiously.
- "Good-bye."

He was gone at last! Left alone with her own thoughts, Hessie's nervous excitement increased instead of diminished. An intense longing for the familiar companionship of one of her old friends came upon her. Oh, why had they deserted her so cruelly? A kind word from one of them might help her to put this deadly temptation from her. Perhaps the mere sight of one of them would be enough. She snatched up her hat with the wild thought of going at once to the forge or to Miss White's, but her rebellious pride arose and checked her on the threshold of the door. She

## Storming of Honeysuckle Cottage

threw the hat from her, and, casting herself down on the sofa, buried her face amongst the cushions. Something came into the room while she lay there, and touched her with a soft appealing tongue. She put her arm round the mastiff's neck and drew his head down beside hers.

"What shall I do, Guardy?" she sobbed; "what shall I do! Go—at the cost of my honour and my love; or stay—and give up—ah, more than I can make you understand!"

She sat up and looked dimly at her dumb friend. The dog seated himself at her feet, and rested his great head on her lap. His clear, golden-brown eyes were fixed wistfully upon her face, and his tail beat the carpet in eager sympathy. She leaned forward, and, placing a caressing hand on each side of his noble head, gazed down earnestly into the clear depths of his eyes.

"You are only a dog, Guardy," she said, with a pathetic catch in her voice, "and I am a human being: yet, for all my better teaching and understanding, your heart is far truer, far nobler than mine, dear. You would prefer a crust of bread—or even to starve—by the side of those you loved, however they might treat you, than all the fame and all the luxuries this world could offer. Your allegiance could not be tempted or dismayed; and I honour you for it—as I would the greatest hero in the land!" She drooped her head until her

lips touched his broad forehead, and he licked the wrists on either side of his huge mouth encouragingly.

She raised her head again and went on, with the same pathetic catch in her breathing, the same earnest gaze into the wistful doggy eyes.

"But I am not so good and true, Guardian. why can't you understand how weak and mean I am beside you? Why can't you make me think as you do, dear? What I give up-if I stayis that which would bring me forgetfulness of the past, by steeping my mind in a long delirium of selfish contemptible joy: but I crave it, Guardian, with every breath I draw—it is dearer to me than friendship! than love!—than truth!—than honour!" She withrew her hands and hurriedly hid her face in them. "Ah, shame upon me!" she sobbed. "Yes, I know that you are right, and that I am wrong; I honour your faithfulness, and I loathe my treachery; but that doesn't help me as it ought." Her hands fell heavily into her lap, and she leaned over the uneasy dog again. "Can vou help me, I wonder, Guardian?"

He whined faintly, and, lifting his head, tenderly licked the pale tear-disfigured face above him.

"Ah, no!" she faltered on. "You can only love me. Human beings love too, Guardy—but they judge, and reproach, and desert as well! You do none of these things; and because you do none

## Storming of Honeysuckle Cottage

of these things, your love is sweeter to me than theirs. I—I may cast their love from me, Guardian, but—come what may—I shall never, never part with yours!"

Somehow she had gradually settled down upon the floor beside the dog, with one arm resting on the sofa and pillowing her head and the other round Guardian's neck. Evening drew on, and still she lay there and still the faithful animal kept watch beside her.

At length Guardian's head was sharply raised, with attentive ears and an alert face. The next instant he had broken away from Hessie and had bounded through the open door. Hessie guessed why he had left her, although her less sensitive hearing had not caught the sound of the approaching footsteps. Oh, she was not mistaken! Tom's welcome voice, in a distinct note of alarm, speedily followed Guardian's disappearance.

"Hessie! Hessie!"

She staggered to her feet, and stumbled into the porch.

Tom, looking startled and uneasy, was in the act of hastily passing through the gate. Guardian was in front of him, looking back at him impatiently. Both halted abruptly as they caught sight of her.

"Oh, there you are!" cried Tom, in a tone of heartfelt relief; but Hessie's vague hope that her evident distress would master him, and bring him

lovingly to her side once more, died as she looked at and listened to him. "Guardian was so bent on bringing me in that I began to fear something tremendous had happened. Is anything the matter?"

"No," she said chokingly.

"But you look so pale," he exclaimed. "And you've been crying, Hessie!"

"I am—quite well," she gasped.

"What is it, then?" he asked, and there was dawning hope and tenderness in his tone.

He only wanted encouragement; and, perhaps, Hessie would have given it him, but for the sharp disappointment he had already occasioned her. But, because of her delusive hopes, the palpable fact that nothing short of verbal appeal could now conquer him rankled in her breast. She had no desire to repel him, but she spoke with involuntary pride and coldness.

"Nothing!" she said.

He felt the rebuff, but still he persisted.

"What made Guardian so anxious to bring me in?"

She struggled vainly to subdue the devastating bitterness in her heart.

"I don't know," she said hardly. "He probably thinks it strange that you don't come in as you used to. He doesn't understand desertion!"

Tom was stung.

## Storming of Honeysuckle Cottage

"Ah no, poor fellow!" he retorted bitterly.

"He doesn't know that there is such a thing as callous coquetry—he would understand it then!"

Hessie raised her hands to her face with a sharp cry.

The scale no longer trembled in the balance: before the blighting heat of those innocently unjust words, love shrivelled and ambition fell triumphant. Hessie's torturing indecision, her enervating nervousness, her grievous heartache, all fled before them, and left her cold, calm, resolved. She came swiftly down the path, holding out her hand.

"I want nothing from you, Tom," she said, pausing before him, "and I have much to do this evening; and please don't call at all to-morrow: I want to be left alone for a day: I will let you know if I want anything. Good-bye."

"Good-bye?" he repeated, wondering. "Good-night—you mean."

" As you please."

Strangely and haughtily as she spoke, he regarded the coldly proffered hand in the light of an implied step towards a reconciliation. The manner and the words were, no doubt, due to his cutting accusation, and her approaching him and offering him her hand was certainly a decided advance from her usual frosty greeting from the porch.

He took the little hand: he longed to take

her to his heart; but he thought that he would humour her—wait until the day after to-morrow! This discipline would do her good; but he decided that it had lasted long enough: he would talk it over with his mother and Miss White this very evening, and end it all—the day after to-morrow!

"All right. Good-night," he said, and hurriedly left her.

Hessie walked back to the house very slowly, and, when she had reached the porch, she sat down weakly upon the step. Guardian, still worried about her, immediately seated himself at her side. She put an arm about him and hugged him close.

"Guardian," she whispered wistfully, "I wish this sudden, curious numbness and indifference would leave me. There is looming cruelty and danger in it, I know; and I can't care, I can't care! I wish my aches and doubts and fears would all come back again—they were my safeguards. But my heart has been stunned. Shall I seek the man who dealt the blow, Guardian, and ask him to make me care again? Your eyes seem to say 'Yes,' old faithful friend; but I cannot, oh, I cannot! I'm afraid of nothing now, and I care for nothing now—but myself and you. So shall I go in and write those letters—or shall I wait till morning? I am impatient to get them written; yet I feel I ought to give myself to the

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last minute. Decide for me, Guardian of my love. You must decide—somehow? Let me think. Ah, I have it!"

She put her hand into the pocket of her simple dress, and drew out a biscuit.

"I always carry something nice about me for my dumb fellow-creatures, don't I, Guardy?" she went on, in a plaintively caressing tone, as she proceeded to break the biscuit in half. "Although I am such a bad girl that all my human friends have deserted me, I am never unkind to animals, am I, Guardy? I love them, and they love me—always."

With a piece of biscuit in each hand, she turned and made the mastiff face her.

"Now, Guardy," she said, putting her hands behind her, "I shall offer you both hands at once. If you eat first from the right, I'll wait till tomorrow; if from the left, those letters shall be written to-night. Attention! Steady!"

He was all eager expectation. She offered both hands simultaneously. The portion in her right hand was first gently taken.

"So it is to be to-morrow," she said, giving him the other portion. "So be it. I'll sleep on the matter to-night."

And that night she dreamt a curious dream. She thought that it was morning, and that she was busy stitching and packing, and getting

everything in readiness to leave her pretty little home. Evening drew on, and she grew very weary because of her long unflagging industry; and, lying down on the sofa in her little parlour, she fell asleep. And as she slept she thought she was suddenly startled into consciousness by a man's stealing into the room, with bent head, out of the dusk of the evening. He fell on his knees by her side, and, burying his face in his hands, prayed aloud to her to give him back his faith. He raised his head as he arose, and she saw the face of Richard Attwood. The pathos of his prayer, the white misery of his face, moved her to go to him and try to reassure him. arose with that intention; but, as he swiftly retreated, he waved her off with his outstretched arms, crying:

"Don't come, don't come! In mercy!"

And with those words ringing in her ears, she awoke.



#### CHAPTER IX

# THE SURRENDER OF THE HONEYSUCKLE COTTAGE

"Who trusts himself to woman, or to waves, Should never hazard what he fears to lose."

On leaving Hessie, Richard Attwood rode home through a tumultuous sea of everwhelming suspense. He was not finally answered as he had so fondly hoped, and he knew the extra time extorted from him, although only amounting to a few hours, would drag gallingly. As he rode along, he bitterly cursed the maddening caprice and indecision of woman. All that evening he paced his rooms—a bed-room and a communicating study—in a restless agony of mind. Collins ventured to disturb him several times on the plea that his master would take some refreshment and rest, but he was always impatiently dismissed. Night grew on, and the faithful servant appeared for the last time before retiring.

"Sir, can I get anything for you, before I go to bed?"

"Collins!" his master burst out. "I told you I should bring my campaign to a close this afternoon—why have you not inquired as to the result? I must talk it over with someone—or I believe I shall go mad!"

"I shall be glad to hear about it, sir," Collins submissively responded. "I didn't inquire, because I thought you would prefer me to wait until you spoke."

"All right. Perhaps I wasn't ready to discuss it until now. Well, Collins, I have brought my attack to a close, and the result is—that I am to wait until to-morrow for my answer!"

"Ah!" said the valet calmly. "I guessed as much, sir."

"From my anxious restlessness, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, the delay is trying, Collins—torturing! But there's hope in it, don't you think so?"

The question was put pleadingly, but Collins was dumb.

"My storming has shaken the citadel to its foundation," pursued his master hurriedly; "but it still maintains its position, and reserves its privileges obstinately enough."

"Will Miss Lane write to you, sir?" the valet asked irrelevantly.

"I was coming to that. Yes, Collins, she will write. To-morrow you must start off for the village



## Surrender of Honeysuckle Cottage

early enough to be at the Honeysuckle Cottage by ten, and you will bring me back the note containing her decision. What say you on the result?"

Collins had no doubt on the subject whatever, and he felt it his duty to prepare his master to be disappointed. Disregarding the fact that the latter was in that state of nervous tension when the mind clamours desperately for a word of hope, however vain, and violently rejects all else, the valet replied boldly:

"I wouldn't build on her refusing your favours, sir. She's hanging off now to give more importance to her acceptance by-and-by—it's a way they have. She'll yield like the rest of them—they're all alike."

Richard Attwood, who had kept up his feverish walk all during this colloquy, now paused before his servant, and, seizing him by the collar, shook him fiercely.

"You slander her!" he cried.

The servant freed himself respectfully from his master's grasp.

"For your sake, sir, I hope I do," he returned imperturbably. "But I don't think so. You remember I expressed regret when you told me you were going to make another trial—after having given it all up?"

"Yes," said his master miserably, as he sank into a chair.

"Well, I'm more sorry than ever, sir, now that I

see you're going to take it so hard. Can I do anything for you, sir?"

- "No-thank you."
- "Good-night, sir."
- "Good-night."

Richard Attwood's bed remained undisturbed that night: the morning found him still seated in the arm-chair—heavy-eyed, pale, and haggard. His valet's evident dismay on thus discovering him provoked the following reluctant admission:

"I had to plan out the future, Collins, in—in case she yields, you know. There was much to think of—to think of at once; for, of course, if she decides to come, she will want me to take her away immediately. What says the old adage? Hope for the best, and prepare yourself for the worst. Well, that's what I've been doing. There was a great deal to prepare myself for in the latter event, and—and the night didn't pass so very slowly. I think I must have dozed now and then."

Collins' heart began to ache a little for the man before him. Surely he was half mad? Collins had long ago decided that he had a screw loose somewhere.

"Give it up, sir!" he burst out impetuously. "Because I have served you so long and so faithfully—because I love you as a servant seldom loves his master—you will listen to me patiently, I'm sure. You have tried this test of yours so often

# Surrender of Honeysuckle Cottage

now, and what good has it ever done to you or to others? What good can it ever do? Surely you can rest satisfied that the woman you seek doesn't exist, without sacrificing this little village girl? Don't send me to the cottage this morning, sir! Write and tell her you give it all up. Let us go away again and travel. She is sweeter, but, believe me, no stronger than the others!"

Had she touched Collins' world-hardened heart too? The usually imperturbable man was certainly strangely moved, strangely earnest. For some seconds his master looked at him in silent wonderment, then he spoke gravely.

"Collins," he said, "I will not run away, but—before God!—this girl shall be the last subjected to my test. I cannot throw up the sponge, because I believe she is the woman I have so long sought. That conviction is overmastering. Dozing or thinking, it was with me last night."

With a sigh, the valet turned away and began to busy himself about the room. As he was quitting it, he said remindingly to the quiet figure in the arm-chair:

- "I brought up your hot water, sir."
- "I don't think I shall breakfast with the family this morning, Collins," was the response. "Bring me up a roll and a cup of coffee—I want nothing else."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Very well, sir."

When Collins returned with the roll and coffee, his master had drawn up a table, and on it stood a handsome bottle and two little glasses filled with choice liqueur. As the servant put down the tray, his master pushed one of the little glasses towards him, and took up the other. Collins watched him rise, with a sudden colour in his cheeks, a sudden fire in his eyes, and hold up the tiny glass.

"To the withstanding of the Honeysuckle Cottage!" he cried.

"Amen," responded the valet; and the glasses were set down empty.

" Now, go!"

The valet left the room.

As calm, as resolved, as unfeeling as when she had sought her couch, Hessie arose early on that eventful morning. The immediate consciousness of her vivid dream caused her a passing feeling of surprise—that was all. Her simple toilet was soon over, and she descended. She quickly prepared her frugal breakfast and Guardian's, and both were soon despatched. Then she washed up; made things generally neat; and finally sat down to write the three letters her mind had been busily cogitating over from the moment of her awakening. Guardian followed her to the writing-table, and sat down by her side. The letters were speedily accomplished. The first was to Richard Attwood, Esq., and ran:



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"DEAR MR ATTWOOD,—I confide my future to your hands. I make but two conditions. I must go away at once, and I cannot part with Guardy.

"HESTER LANE."

The second was as follows:

"DEAR TOM,—I have left the village for ever. Now that you, your mother, and Miss White have cast me off, it has no hold on me whatever. Do not worry about me. I go to make my name famous as a singer, under the care of our good friend and benefactor, Richard Attwood.

"HESS."

#### To Miss White she wrote:

"You are cruel now, Miss White, but you have been so kind! I cannot leave the village without sending you a few words of farewell. When I get my dear father's little legacy, I will repay Mr Attwood every penny of what he now advances me for my present needs; so don't think more meanly of me than I deserve. For his thoughtfulness for me, for his kind care of me, I cannot pay him; and I am content, so far, gratefully to remain in his debt. HESSIE."

She laid down the pen, and pushed back her chair; and now her nocturnal flights of imagination returned to her with more effect.

"Do you believe in dreams, Guardy?" she

suddenly asked, looking down at her dumb companion and addressing him as, in her loneliness, she had learnt to address him — as if he were a human being. "If there is anything in them, those letters will bring us ruin. are above superstition, aren't we, Guardy? only troubles the weak and ignorant - and we are strong and wise! We will face our new future with stout hearts — won't we, dear? although it will seem so strange, so strange! So when a man, with a dark, solemn face and a machine-like manner, calls presently for one of those letters, we are going to give it to him light-heartedly, aren't we? And it will pave the way to such a glorious, happy future for me . . . . and — and — for you? Well, Guardy, I'm—I'm You see, the country is much pleasanter for a dog than the city. I'm afraid you will miss the pure air, the green fields, and pleasant lanes; but you'd rather miss them than me any day, wouldn't you, dear? And so I am going to take you with me. But, Guardy, if I were anything like what I ought to be, I'd do something far, far better-I'd stay in this pure air, among these green fields and pleasant lanes -with you. I'd not break Miss White's heart, mother's, and—and Tom's—and, oh, Guardian! if dreams bring us the truth, Mr Attwood's as well! My own would grieve too much.



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mine is almost dead, Guardian: just a little corner of it quickens to your name, that's all; and so I must fall and be cast off because it no longer lives to guide me, although I did not strike the blow that crushed it! Does poking your muzzle into my hand mean—Did I bring it on myself? Well, perhaps I did, perhaps I did. And so we'll say no more."

She was silent, lost in a reverie. The appearance of Collins first roused her. She went to the door with the letter in her hand, calmly bade him good-morning, and handed it to him. He touched his cap and instantly departed.

Hessie did not return to her dreams; she spent a busy morning packing and putting away, and sobbing, in a little, helpless, unfeeling way, over it all. Early that evening saw a neat, staid, impenetrable woman, who was a perfect stranger to the village, installed in the familiar cottage. Pretty Hessie Lane and her stalwart champion, Guardian, were gone. And Tom, his mother, and Miss White were dreaming of the morrow when they would resolutely take the wilful, capricious little beauty again under their sheltering wings.

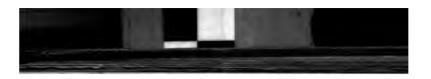
#### CHAPTER X

## SOME OF THE MISERY THAT FOLLOWED IN ITS TRAIN

"I have that within me that passeth show."

Tom's impatience for the reconciliation agreed upon made him present himself at the Honeysuckle Cottage at an early hour on the ensuing morning. He had no doubts of finding Hessie up and about, however; for to rise with the cocks and the hens was the general order of the day. The simple hygienic life of the villagers made it seem the pleasantest thing to do. He was surprised not to find the front door of the cottage open to let in the pure, mild air, and knocked at it with peremptory uneasiness. It was opened, after an irritating interval, by the neat, staid, impenetrable stranger.

- "Sorry to keep you waiting," she said sourly, "but I'm not used to getting up this early."
  - "Where is Hester Lane?" gasped Tom, alarmedly.
  - "She went away yesterday afternoon," returned



#### Misery that Followed in its Train

the woman calmly; "and I'm to look after the cottage until further orders. I know nothing, except that I'm well paid to take care of the place, which is all I want to know. You're Mr Tom Mason, I suppose. Yes? Well, she said you'd call this morning, and I was to give you these letters."

She turned back into the room, caught up two letters from the writing-table, and came back to him.

"Here they are!" she said, hurriedly putting them into his hand. "Miss Lane said I was to tell you that they will explain everything, and that I know nothing—and must not be bothered. Goodmorning!" And she shut the door in his face.

Tom turned weakly away, and sat down on the step of the porch. He laid the letters beside him, and glanced blankly at their superscriptions.

"To me—and to Miss White!" he murmured, in an awed tone.

With a sudden numbing coldness upon him, he took up the one addressed to himself, opened and read it. The coldness became paralysing: he sat, white and rigid, with the letter in his hand, while the moments flew, with their accustomed regularity, indifferently away. Filos, who had, of course, accompanied him, sat patiently at his side. Quite half an hour slipped away before Tom roused himself to a sense of the passing time. Then he rose dazedly, and walked, with bent head, slowly

back to the forge. The strange woman, peeping at him through the window, was quite relieved to see him go off pacifically. She did not like that white set look of his face.

His mother stood in the doorway, eagerly awaiting him.

"Well?" she said, on his near approach. "How did you get on? I quite thought you'd bring Hessie back with you!" And there was a ring of disappointment in her tone.

He raised his head and looked at her, and she started back from him.

"Why, what's the matter, Tom?" she cried.

"Hessie's gone away for good, mother," he said stupidly. "She went yesterday afternoon—with—with Mr Attwood. See! She wrote me this, and here's one for Miss White. A strange woman gave them to me—a woman left to look after the cottage."

Mrs Mason seized the letter, and rapidly made herself mistress of its contents. Then they exchanged one long, appalled look, and entered the house together, Mrs Mason clinging tremblingly to Tom's arm. Once inside, she put her arms round him, and laid her head upon his bosom.

"Oh, Tom! My poor, dear boy!" she sobbed.

"What have we done? Oh, what have we done!"

"We did it for the best," he said dully.

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- "Yes, yes! God knows! And she—she's a——"
- "Hush, mother!"
- "But not to understand and trust us, Tom, after all these years! To treat you so—so deceitfully!"
  - "Hush, mother!"
- "To drag our hearts through the dust—we who loved her so!"
- "Hush, mother! There's one more to blame than-she; but I don't want to talk of him, nor to think of him—yet!"
- "Yes, yes! The double-faced, black-hearted villain! But *Hessie*, Tom? I don't feel now that I can ever forgive her. . . . Still, she must be found, Tom, found—and brought back, poor misguided child!"
- "It's too late, mother. Hessie's quite lost to us now."
- "What do you mean, Tom? Aren't you going to seek her at all?"
  - "What for? She left us—yesterday!"
  - "Oh, Tom! you surely don't think-"

Mrs Mason drew herself away, and fell helplessly into a chair. He threw himself on his knees before her, and seized her fiercely by the arms.

"Seek her?" he cried, with blazing eyes. "To find her Mr Attwood's plaything! Seek her? To be revenged on him!" A sob broke from him. "Not while I have you to care for, mother! Oh,

mother, mother! tell me that I'm right, and that it is not worth while!"

He dropped his head into her lap, and his great frame quivered piteously. She bent over him, soothing him with tender words and caresses.

"My good faithful boy! You are right, quite right, my son. I can't spare you. Only, your old mother's heart breaks to think that those who have brought this awful sorrow on you should not be called to account for it."

"Never mind. They'll not escape, although I'll not meddle with them now. It's one of Nature's laws, isn't it, mother?—that those who sin must suffer."

"Yes, Tom, that's so. Where are you going, son?" for he had risen and turned towards the door.

"To give Miss White her letter."

"Have a bite of breakfast first, Tom. See! it's all ready."

He glanced at the table, but shook his head.

"When I come back," he said. "But don't wait for me, mother."

More than an hour passed before he returned. Mrs Mason had thought it impossible for a man to look more shocked and crushed than Tom did when he had raised his head to give her the news of Hessie's flight, but he looked more so now. The interview must have been painful in



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the extreme; yet, in answer to her inquiry as to how Miss White had taken the blow, he only said, "Badly."

After a hasty breakfast, forced down his throat to satisfy his mother. Tom set at once to work to gather from the cottage walls all the gifts the traitor had made him. These he burnt, one by one, including Hessie's portrait. Mrs Mason looked on in silent protest: she was naturally sorry to lose so many pretty, expensive things, and she was troubled at their ruthless and useless destruction: but Tom's face and manner did not invite interference. And somehow, for all her disapproval, she understood and sympathised with his feeling in the matter. The pictures all burnt, Tom looked down at the little terrier at his feet, who was watching his master and the growing conflagration with bright inquiring eyes. then Mrs Mason's big, tender heart spoke out, in spite of Tom's face and manner.

"You wouldn't hurt the innocent dumb creature,
Tom! Surely, you wouldn't hurt the little dog?"
Tom laughed harshly.

"No," he said. "Don't be afraid, mother. I hope I'm too much of a man for that. I was only thinking I must find him a home, a good home—but out of my sight. Filos, Filos! If I knew the Spanish for all that's false and treacherous—that should be your name!"

The dog, hearing his name, rose and fawned upon him.

"Not that you deserve it, old boy," Tom went on, meeting the dog's gaze kindly, but without the usual caress; "but because your name was to be a bond of good faith between me and that—that—Well, there's work to be done!"

Miss White came to see Mrs Mason after school was over, and the two women wept, and wondered, and reproached themselves, while Tom worked in the forge with feverish energy. But Miss White never said, "I told you so," although being, if exceptional, only a woman after all, the remembrance of her repeated warnings must have recurred to her and the temptation been strong.

"I'm so thankful, madam," Mrs Mason said, drying her eyes, "that Tom has taken it quietly. If he had made the fuss most men would have made in his place, I believe he'd have frightened me into my grave."

"He has shown wonderful self-control," Miss White returned; "but the blow has struck deep. We must hope and strive, however, that it may not blight his life."

"Yes, indeed. 'Twould be an awful shame for it to spoil his future. He's so true and loving. She wasn't worth him."

Miss White winced.

"She—she is very young and inexperienced,

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remember, dear Mrs Mason," she faltered tearfully. "And she has been through a fierce fire, I am sure. All alone, poor little dazzled ignorant thing! We were in the dark, you know, and didn't help her in the least. I—I'm afraid we—we even added the last straw by—by holding off from her—that fatal week!"

Miss White's quivering words instantly brought Mrs Mason to a truer frame of mind.

"Yes, she was a child in mind and heart, poor little creature!" she admitted. "And we didn't help her in her struggle; God forgive us!"

"Amen!"

"But we didn't know, madam."

"No, we didn't know; but our insight was at fault. Mrs Mason! I feel that I have lost a daughter—she was my child, I brought her up—a daughter, whom, for all my love, I did not properly understand and care for!"

And Miss White broke down.

"Don't take on so, madam. I can't bear to see it. The villain! How dared he?... Hessie, a helpless baby!... We, so pleasant, grateful, and trusting! Oh, the villain, the villain, the villain!"

Miss White pulled herself together and hardened.

"Ah, at last we have the saddle on the right horse!" she said. "But hush! here's Tom."

On parting, Miss White drew Mrs Mason aside, and whispered:

"Make much of Tom's filial duty to you; I think it has been his salvation."

Tom walked home with her, Filos meekly following. Filos was puzzled: he had not been treated unkindly, but he had been subtly ignored all day—and he showed his dejection. Miss White took possession of him on reaching her home.

"Leave him with me, Tom," she said. "I will find a kind home for him."

Tom gratefully acquiesced. The little terrier looked yearningly at Tom from Miss White's arms, and Tom could not but give him a final caress. As he touched him, he burst out irrelevantly:

"I—I once told that man that my life was at his service, Miss White . . . . but he's taken what I'll give to no man—whoever he is, or whatever I owe him—my honour! If she wasn't my wife, she was as good. You know I want to follow him . . . . you know I want to strike him down, and stamp out his false, smiling face . . . . don't you, Miss White? That . . . that I'm not doing it because of—mother! But if I ever have only myself to work for, and he's living, he shall answer for it then! It's not worth while now, is it?"

"It will never be worth while, dear Tom."

"Perhaps not—but he shall answer for it—then!"
In due time the village resounded with the romantic story of the swell gentleman's advent and final departure; but it continued to marvel over



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Tom, long after it had wearied of discussing Richard Attwood, Esq. and simple Hessie Lane. Tom's appearance and manner were shockingly changed—the affair had left an indelible mark on him; yet he said nothing, threatened nobody, kept steadily at work. You see, the villagers did not possess Miss White's intuition, and their nights were not haunted by that quiet, intense:

"He shall answer for it then!"

#### PART II

#### CHAPTER XI

#### A FAIR YOUNG SIREN

"What a strange thing is man! and what a stranger is woman!"

THREE years passed eventfully. The first Hessie spent at Mrs Winston's in London, patiently, industriously, and meritoriously going through the elementary stages of her training. The second she spent under careful chaperonage on the Continent, where all the fascinating finishing touches were carefully added. Her voice triumphantly stood the test of this rigid training, proving itself enduring and without alloy. The third year saw her return to Mrs Winston's, and presented the fair young siren to the London public. and pushed by Richard Attwood's wealth and influence, and under Signor Martelli's capable guidance, she rose steadily and rapidly to the front. On her coming of age, she realised her little capital, and gratefully repaid Richard Attwood most of the expenses of her training. Then

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she felt she could breathe more easily. The indebtedness remaining did not last long, for Richard Attwood and Signor Martelli worked indefatigably over her engagements, and they poured in upon her. After a while, all obligations being settled, and a fair income being pretty well assured, her custodians advised a change of abode. So Hessie left Mrs Winston's homely roof, and took a smart flat in a fashionable quarter. It was artistically furnished for her by one of the best houses in London. Two maid servants were duly installed; and the elderly gentlewoman who had accompanied Hessie to the Continent gladly accepted the post of duenna.

This lady was quiet and inoffensive in the extreme; but there was a fund of common sense in her silvered head, a depth of nice feeling in her spare frame, which, when called upon, never failed you. Richard Attwood had spent no little time and pains in the choice of Hessie's companion, and he felt well repaid every time he found himself in the presence of Mrs Greyson. He was pleased to note that Hessie quickly grew fond of her, and relied on her greatly; and Mrs Greyson was certainly keenly interested in her charge, and returned her affection cordially.

Well, it was an old, old story once more retold. Hessie became the fashion: her photographs prominently decorated the shop windows; tender

scions of noble names courted her and heaped expensive gifts upon her; and, escorted by Richard Attwood, whose ward she was considered to be, she was welcomed into some of the most select houses in London. Yes, Richard Attwood went back wearily into the world he had impatiently forsaken, and, for Hessie's sake, pursued its shallow rounds unflinchingly.

And this life so completely transformed Hessie that often, taking tea with her in her charmingly up-to-date little drawing-room, Richard Attwood, while holding a toy cup and saucer of exquisite china and idly stirring the latest fad in teas with a silver apostle spoon, would fall into a reverie. wondering if her former friends could possibly recognise her. With his mind painfully full of the plump, natural little figure in the Honeysuckle porch, in its blue gingham gown, and old widebrimmed hat, with its work-roughened hands and childish manner—he would look and look, and listen and listen; and, in his easy little hostess, with her fashionable chatter, stylish coiffure, trim, handsomely gowned figure, and white, beringed hands, fail to discover a trace of the winsome chrysalis from which this distracting butterfly had sprung. "It must be the sudden change from an outdoor life and early hours to a life of confinement and late excitement which has made her grow so white and slender," he would muse. "And how quickly



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she has picked up the trifling talk and arts of society! Like a duck to water!... Yes, good God, I might have known!—like a duck to water!"

And then Hessie would rally him upon his abstraction, and he would try to meet her talk in kind—until the Honourable Mr Queerby and Sir Dudley Cazer, or Lord Gaybright and Mr Millions would be announced, and conversation become safely general.

Signor Martelli's ambition for his gratifying pupil was not satisfied with her successes on the concert platform and in the drawing-rooms of the elite: he wished to introduce her on the operatic stage, and see her shine as a star from behind the footlights. The concert platform and the drawingrooms were all very well to begin with, but the stage was, in his opinion, the great goal to be gained and won; and he felt that it was now time to set about doing it. So, with this end in view, he called upon Hessie one afternoon, and found her at her pretty tea-table, with Mrs Greyson in attendance as usual. He had hardly been greeted, and provided with a cup of tea, which he did not want, and a tiny piece of rolled bread and butter, which he did not want either, when Richard Attwood appeared. Signor Martelli was annoyed at his advent, because he particularly desired to see Hessie alone-that he might familiarise and fascinate her with the idea of entering stageland

before letting anyone else into the discussion. Unobtrusive Mrs Greyson counted as nobody in his eyes—a woman who always sat in the background, with her eyes on a piece of needlework, never speaking unless spoken to. So Signor Martelli had meekly accepted the tea and bread and butter, because he had heard somewhere that a woman was most amenable when you were taking afternoon tea with her, and had felt himself ready for the fray—and here was another element to be coped with! However, he made the best of the position, and, his impatience declining to postpone the subject to a more fitting opportunity, he brought it on the carpet with effect and discoursed on it long and eloquently.

But Richard Attwood vigorously vetoed the whole thing.

"No, no!" he cried, as soon as the voluble little Italian gave him the chance to speak. "It's hard enough to look after her properly as it is—it would be impossible on the stage. I cannot consent to her running any risks, for I have made myself responsible for her welfare. I am glad I dropped in."

"But mademoiselle is her own mistress now," the irrepressible little musician boldly continued. "It is for her to decide, is it not?"

"And I don't think she will decide against me," Richard Attwood returned, concealing his anxious



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doubts under the apparently confident smile with which he turned towards Hessie.

"No, of course not!" she said, with an answering smile. "But for you it would all not have been possible. You need never be afraid of my taking any steps without consulting you, and I will do nothing that you do not advise."

"Thank you, thank you very much," was the relieved response. "Believe me, Hessie, I have your interests always sincerely at heart. I would like to see you as famous as Signor Martelli could desire—only, not at the cost of your self-respect, or any portion of it."

"Pah, monsieur!" retorted the Signor. "One can keep oneself as right dere as in odder places."

"No doubt. But the dangers of the stage are difficult to overcome, and—frankly!—I do not feel myself able to cope with them. If the concert platform is duller, Hessie, comfort yourself that it is, generally speaking, safer and more respectable than the stage."

"It is enough excitement for me," she replied cheerily. "I don't think my life could hold much more. I fancy I am a little afraid of the stage myself."

Signor Martelli rose and shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, well!" he said, still appealing to Hessie, "So I must not hope to hear you sing Marguerite, Eleezabet, Elsa, den?... Helas! 'Tis a big

peety, mademoiselle, a ver big peety! . . . . Quelle charmante Marguerite, Elisabeth, Elsa! Heigho!" and he sighed prodigiously. The Signor had a weakness for the French tongue.

Hessie rose and took his hand.

"Dear Signor!" she said, "I thank you most gratefully for your kind interest—but—Mr Attwood has decided for the best for me, I am sure. I am awfully sorry to disappoint you. Must you run away? Another cup of tea—just to show there's no ill-feeling? No? Well, au revoir, good friend. You play my accompaniments at the Queen's Hall to-morrow night, remember! I'm so glad! I can always do best when you play for me, because I feel I have your reputation as well as my own to keep up. Till to-morrow night, then."

The little Italian brushed her hand with his bristly moustache, and sadly departed.

"Are you disappointed, Hessie?" Richard Attwood then asked.

" Not at all."

"I felt compelled to withhold my consent. It is very good of you to yield so readily to my wishes."

"It seems only right," said Hessie, flushing slightly. For Hessie still believed that Richard Attwood was in love with her, and she felt, in consideration of all his efforts on her behalf, that she owed him obedience so far as it lay in her



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power. She was not in love with him herself, only intensely grateful to him, excessively proud of his notice, very dependent on his counsel. And she liked him a great deal better than the enthusiastic youths who crowded about her; he attracted her far more. Her ideas of the future were not clearly defined, but they hazily encompassed the notion that she would have a glorious time of it first, and then, when things were beginning to lose their first all-engrossing bloom, repay Mr Attwood by marrying him.

Mr Attwood read her thoughts easily, and he was heroically prepared to support her castle in the air-unless, by some good fortune, Hessie, in the meantime, succumbed to the fascinations of a Prince Charming, to whose suit he could conscientiously give his approval. He felt not a little proud of himself for the physical and moral care he was taking of the poor, frail, common little flower he had so ruthlessly plucked from that far away village garden; and he keenly longed to assure Miss White, Mrs Mason, and Tom of this. He had longed to do so from the first. But careful reflection always made him feel that it would be neither kind nor wise. He could not convince them of his disinterested protection of the pretty child, without fully explaining to them his serious aim in so besetting her; and having done this, he could not be sure that they would not feel

it their duty to impress Hessie further with her iniquity—possibly with the vain hope of reclaiming her-by letting her know that in acting as she had done she had gained no one's approval and regard. that Mr Attwood mourned over her defection as deeply as they did, Proud, impressionable Hessie would never return to the village, but would sink into a pit of reckless despair; and she would assuredly refuse him when, circumstances leaving him no other honourable alternative, he asked her to be his wife. And what would become of her then? He shivered as the different possibilities presented themselves. No, only if the dreamwoman had been found could he have cleared himself with Miss White, Mrs Mason, and Tom; as she had not been found he must, in common compassion, be content to remain tarred with this last helpless specimen of weak womanhood, in whom he had trusted to find her.

How completely Tom, Miss White, and Mrs Mason seem to have forgotten Hessie! They had never, to his knowledge, attempted to follow her, or to communicate with her in any way. How completely she seemed to have forgotten them!—after that first week of nervous weeping, before the new interests had been fairly established, she never mentioned them, or, to all outward appearances, thought of them.

But a week or so later, he almost induced him-



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self to believe that Hessie's mind had turned for a moment to Tom. They were at the Countess of Harbringer's; and on Hessie's having completed her share in the evening's entertainment, the beautiful Countess, in her particularly charming way, approached to say a few gracious words to her. Mr Attwood was standing beside his ward.

"Thank you so much, Miss Lane," the hostess said, "for the great pleasure you have given us. I envy you the power so to charm."

"I am very glad to know that your ladyship is pleased," returned Hessie, simply. "You are very kind."

"And now, I want to introduce a new recruit to the realm of music," pursued the Countess: "a young German violinist who has just come over and who threatens to rival Joachim and Sarasate. May I?" with an interrogatory glance which included Mr Attwood. "He is most anxious to meet Miss Lane."

"Of course you may!" smiled Mr Attwood.

"I should like to meet him," added Hessie, "very much."

The Countess glanced round the room.

"There he is, over there," she said, with a graceful wave of her fan. "That big blond man. A fine-looking specimen, isn't he? Quite the physique of a blacksmith."

As the words left her lips, Richard Attwood's 183

eyes, following hers, were suddenly turned upon Hessie. She, too, was looking at the young German, but—was it fancy?—or had her face really quivered and whitened? The Countess, turning to say, "I will fetch him now," seemed struck by a change in her.

"I am afraid you are tired, Miss Lane?" she said kindly.

Hessie started.

"No," she replied confusedly. "Thank you. Did I look pale? It is natural for me to look so now."

Richard Attwood felt as if someone had lashed him across the face. He studied Hessie intently. The glowing complexion of the Honeysuckle porch was quite gone—had been gone sometime—yet he had never missed it so compassionately before. The plumpness of the Honeysuckle porch was gone too—he had noted that before—yet never before with the same uneasy pang.

"Would you like to go home, Hessie?" he gravely asked.

"No, no!" she returned rather irritably. "I feel perfectly well."

With a smile the Countess turned away, returning speedily with Herr Ricksmar in tow. After the introduction the Countess said:

"I think the best thing you can do is to take Miss Lane for some refreshment, Herr Ricksmar."



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"I shall be zo 'appy, my lady," responded the German, offering his arm. And Hessie went off on it, chatting brightly.

The Countess then turned to Richard Attwood, and roused him from his meditations by tapping him smartly with her fan.

"Dick, do you mean to marry that sweet little thing—your ward?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said heavily.

"Don't know! What a stupid creature! Do you know, then, how many years it is since you turned your back on the world, the flesh, and the devil, as personified in society?"

He looked at her pretty golden hair and delicate face, and glanced down over her tall slender figure.

"With you before me, I can't think it's any time," he replied.

"Ah! You have not forgotten how to flatter gracefully. How charming of you! But my daughter came out last season, Dick. To return to your protégée. After all these years you have apparently returned to despised society for her sake, and you seem to have it all your own way with her. Are her parents living?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Brothers or sisters?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Uncles or aunts?"

<sup>&</sup>quot; No."

- "No one with any authority over her?"
- "No one."
- "A sweetheart, perhaps?"
- "Yes, she had one."
- "Cruel Dick! Why didn't you leave her with him?"
- "Well, don't you think it would have been a shame to have left a voice like that under a bushel?"
  - "Yes-I suppose so."
  - "Besides, he was only a blacksmith."
- "A blacksmith! Then, that accounts for that sudden suffering look of hers—it was all my unfortunate remark about Herr Ricksmar! I'm so sorry."
- "Don't distress yourself. She doesn't often think of her old home and its associations, I assure you. If she did then, it didn't last long."
  - "She has adopted this life so readily?"
  - "Ah! Like a duck to water."
- "Well, Dick, when you do find out your own mind, and you want my help, it's yours. Genius makes its own class, of course—still, a chaperon who isn't a social failure is worth something, even in these democratic days."
- "Of course she is! A million thanks. Still the same kind-hearted Ida of yore. But I confess nothing, Countess, remember!"
  - "Oh, all right. I'm glad you take such care



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of her, Dick; I've heard of the inevitable duenna, and think you deserve a good pat on the back. There it is!"

She tapped him playfully with her fan, and turned smilingly away.

All this while sturdy Guardian was not prospering, in spite of the best care and advice. Towards the end of the third year he drooped so seriously that Hessie became greatly alarmed and suddenly decided to send him back to his native air. She looked up a trustworthy messenger, and, under his care, despatched Guardian and a note home to Grassville. The man was directed to take the dog to the village forge and give the blacksmith the note. The siren wept a great deal over the loss of her big pet, and was so sincerely anxious about him that Richard Attwood's heart was stirred. The note merely said:—

"DEAR TOM,—London does not suit Guardian, and although it breaks my heart to part with him, I cannot see him die. Will you take him in and look after him for his own good sake? If not, ask Miss White.

HESSIE."

The messenger was told to bring Guardian back if neither of the proposals contained in the note was accepted. He returned without Guardian, however; and, giving Hessie two notes, was hand-

somely rewarded for his trouble. Tom's note boasted of but one brief sentence:

"I will take care of him.—T. M."

The other was from Miss White, and ran as follows:

"Should you ever need a friend, Hessie, you may call upon me. But unless you do, I hope you will spare us the sorrow of seeing you now.

"ETHEL WHITE."

Richard Attwood, coming in shortly afterwards for the news, found Hessie in a passion of tears. She flung Miss White's note at him.

"What does she mean?" she stormed. "What does she mean?"

But Hessie was three years older than when she had taken the fatal step. Three? She was ten—twenty. Before Richard Attwood, having glanced through the note, could answer her, she went on recklessly:

"What folly to ask you! She thinks I've gone to the bad! How dare she? They all think it! How dare they, how dare they?"

"Hush, Hessie, dear! Calm yourself and let me reason with you."

"It never struck me in that light before!" she cried. "I will not bear it . . . the insult, the unearned insult!"



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She was in a dry-eyed fury now.

"You need not care—since God knows it is all false, Hessie!"

"Ah! but I'm not in heaven, Mr Attwood, I'm on earth!"

"True! But what a little unimportant part of earth they are! Much too insignificant for you to trouble over—in this new world your voice has opened to you. You will never need Miss White as a friend." He tore up the note, and cast the fragments lightly away.

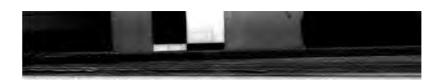
"They don't think anything wrong of me here?" she breathlessly rejoined. "Sure?"

"Not they! I'll annihilate the man or woman who whispered it, and the rest of the world would look on applaudingly—I have taken such care of you!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you! I—I hope to repay you some day. Yes, you are right, quite right. They're not worth thinking of or bothering with. I won't bother with them! Good-bye to Grass-ville!" She tore up Tom's note and cast it away likewise. "Ah, here's Mrs Greyson back from her afternoon constitutional. Just see what a litter we've made, Mrs Greyson, tearing up worthless notes—awfully untidy of us, isn't it?"

"Very; but isn't it almost time for you to think about getting ready for the Richmond dinner, my dear?" the old lady asked.

"I declare it is! Thank you so much for reminding me—I don't know what I should do without you, Mrs Greyson! Fancy! I had forgotten it for the moment. A dinner in my honour, too! And given by a Lord! Mr Attwood, I've a dream of a frock for it; and if you don't say, when you see me in it, that I'm your dreamwoman, I don't think I'll ever forgive you!"



#### CHAPTER XII

#### **ENTHUSIASM**

"Youth! youth! how buoyant are thy hopes! they turn Like marigolds, toward the sunny side."

"DEAR MR ATTWOOD,—Come and see me at once, if possible. Glorious news! HESSIE."

Mr Attwood dismissed the messenger boy, and presented himself promptly in response. He found Hessie with flushed cheeks, brilliant eyes, and tremulous lips. Her hands were clasped behind her, and she stood before him with uplifted chin, raising herself up and down on her toes and trilling saucily—an exultant schoolgirl.

"Well, what is it, dear? You know beforehand, being something good, I'm glad of it. What's the delicious mystery, little girl?"

"Oh, you'll never guess! Never, never guess! What would you say to a command to sing before the Queen! A command to sing before Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria! Fancy my singing before the Queen!"



She brought her hands forward, and eagerly thrust the priceless intimation into his. Her unrestrained pride and joy were very pretty to behold. He caught the little feverish hands in his, letting the precious missive flutter to the floor.

"I'm more than delighted! I congratulate you with my whole heart, Hessie! And you deserve the honour, too. Well earned, little girl, well earned!"

He shook her hands vigorously up and down. She released them gently, and, with a murmured "Thank you," stooped and picked up that enchantingly bewildering letter. Her eyes then were full of tears.

"Oh, if father could only, only know, Mr Attwood! How proud, how endlessly proud he would have been! Isn't it wonderful that his dreams for me should be coming true?"

"They all will, I am convinced, Hessie. And perhaps he does know of it, my child."

Mr Attwood always received any display of true sentiment in her tenderly. In the hour of her supreme triumph, when Miss White, Mrs Mason, Tom, even the so recently regretted Guardian were nothing to her, she remembered her father. A few tears fell upon her cheeks, but she brushed them away, laughed, and went on:



#### Enthusiasm

"I hope I shan't be nervous and shall behave myself properly. I've sent a message to the Signor to ask him to be good enough to drop in this afternoon if he can. He must coach me up for the glorious occasion, and I feel I can't begin to learn too soon. He has sung before the Queen, hasn't he?"

"I believe so, Hessie. Anyhow, we'll get you all the information you want."

"Thanks so much. Oh, I can't get over it, Mr Attwood, I can't get over it! To think that I shall see her in her home! . . . . that great, good, grand woman! . . . . Will she speak to me, do you think?"

"No doubt."

"Ah, it will be something to remember and hold on by for ever and ever, won't it?"

"Yes. With exultation."

"With exultation, dear Mr Attwood, as long as I live!"

"Signor Martelli, Miss." So the big thing was told again, and Hessie was posted on all points, and plans were made.

The red-letter day came and went, and Hessie sang well and generally acquitted herself gracefully. But her inward excitement was so intense that her perceptions were dazed, and she carried away with her but a blurred remembrance of her surroundings during that coveted ordeal, except

on one point. She could recall, with tingling distinctness, the tones of the beautiful voice which had spoken to her so kindly on the conclusion of her performance and presented her with a handsome diamond bracelet. The little sable-gowned, silver-haired lady herself she only saw through the thickest haze of the varying mists of those unforgettable hours. Hessie would often fetch that chaste piece of jewellery from its hiding-place, and sit with it in her lap while she worked, in order to assure her wandering mind, by glancing at the ornament every now and then, that it had really happened and was not all an ecstatic dream. The first time Mr Attwood so caught her, and smiled at her whimsically, she said with emotion and raising the jewel to her lips: "From Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen of England and Empress of India — to Miss White's poor little outcast."

Honours continued to fall Hessie's way. One day brought her a letter from Lord Gaybright, in which he earnestly besought her to be his wife. This proposal was indeed an exhilarating surprise to Hessie. She had long known, of course, that the young lord entertained an enthusiastic admiration for her, but she thought, with a little inevitable sadness, that it was only that careless class of infatuation such great men are often given to feel for those public characters of the opposite



#### Enthusiasm

sex who happen to charm them. That the young lord's feeling for her was much deeper, and a different thing altogether, was truly an elevating and glowing assurance to have; but, through Hessie's keen gratification and gratitude, there ran a powerful and domineering current of nervous For all her natural pleasure and sympathy in the matter, she never hesitated as to what she should do. She sat down at once and wrote Lord Gaybright a very gentle, appreciative, but unqualified refusal. She managed to detain Richard Attwood when her callers were all leaving that afternoon, and as soon as they were alone, she said hurriedly, standing before him: "You consider yourself more or less my guardian, don't you, Mr Attwood?"

- "Yes—I suppose I do."
- "You don't ever feel, then, that I am boring you unjustifiably with my confidences?"
  - "No, no! I want them all."
- "So I thought. And I feel you ought to know that Lord Gaybright has written to ask me to marry him."
  - " Really!"
  - " Yes."

He bent a searching look on her pale, downcast face. "Well, Hessie, I can't honestly say that I'm surprised. Gaybright has let me see his bent pretty plainly of late. He is a good enough

young fellow of unquestionable position and means—he would be a most desirable match for any girl. My earnest advice to you is to follow implicitly the dictates of your own heart, dear."

"I have followed them."

He breathed quickly. Was Gaybright then going to lift the burden from his shoulders?

"Well?" he said interrogatively.

"I have written to decline gratefully the honour he would do me, Mr Attwood, because I do not love him."

"Was that from your heart, Hessie? Quite your heart's truth?"

"Yes, quite."

He strangled the heavy sigh rising within him, and said awkwardly:

"I—I want to impress you, Hessie, with the fact that I quite disinterestedly desire your best happiness and welfare. I—I don't want you to feel—well, hampered—or—or tied—in any way. You understand? You don't feel so at all, I hope. Because I will not have it."

"No, I don't," she said with embarrassment, "at all."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"That's well. That's as I would have it."

"Are you disappointed that I didn't accept



#### Enthusiasm

Lord Gaybright, Mr Attwood?" she asked with difficulty, but with unconquerable pique.

"No-o. Not if you don't love him, of course. Still, if you could have loved him, you know, it would have been a very good thing for you. You would have been a—a—"

"Peeress of the realm!" she chimed in with recovered gaiety. "Think of it! I... poor little Hessie Lane!... a gardener's daughter!" She pirouetted round the room, and, pausing before him, dropped him a graceful curtsey.

"Mr Attwood, I think, after all these honours, that there really must be something in me after all! And my undying gratitude is yours for having discovered me."

"You don't regret anything, then?" he swiftly asked.

" Absolutely nothing!"

Here, at least, was a comfortingly novel feature. The others had regretted—a good deal, too! He looked long at her triumphant, uplifted face. It was flushed and bright.

"I have fancied," he said slowly, "that you have looked too thin and pale of late, Hessie. But you look very well now."

"Oh, I'm all right. My cough bothers me at night sometimes, that's all."

"Are you still taking Sir Henry Benton's prescription?"

"Yes, and Mrs Greyson rubs my chest relentlessly every night."

"That's right. You'll soon get rid of it."

"Oh, yes! I ought to. Fancy taking me to such a famous specialist!"

"You shall always have the best care from me."

"You're much too good to me, Mr Attwood. Oh, must you be going?" For he was holding out his hand.

"I'm afraid I must."

"Well, good-bye for the present, my benefactor!" and she bent her pretty head, and touched his hand with her soft lips.

"Don't, Hessie!" he cried. "It is quite out of place, my child."

"I don't think so," she said boldly. But she drew herself up quickly, nevertheless, and coloured painfully.

"Well?" he said, with cheerful kindliness, to put her at her ease again. "Do I leave Miss White's poor little outcast happy?"

She threw herself lazily into a luxurious reclining chair and broke into a rippling laugh.

"Rather!" she said, looking up at him archly.

"She has had the tremendous honour of a personal interview with the greatest Lady in the Land; and a splendid opportunity of becoming an envied member of the aristocracy; and, this week, she is to to—to——"



#### Enthusiasm

- "To do what, Hessie?"
- "Have you really forgotten?"
- "To tell you the truth, I am growing somewhat bewildered under all your greatnesses!—Ah! I remember!"
  - "Well, finish the sentence for me, then."
- "—and this week she is going to represent the Soprano Voice at the renowned Herr Ricksmar's unique concert, given to display the different branches of music at their very best, and which function Royalty has been graciously pleased to largely patronise."
  - "Good!"
  - "So----?"
  - "So what more could she possibly desire?"
  - "What, indeed!"
  - "She really thinks, Mr Attwood—"
  - "Well?"
  - "That life is not long enough to enjoy life in!"
    And he left her warbling the latest coon song,

And he left her warbling the latest coon song haunted by the refrain:

- "Lou, Lou! don't ah lub ma Lou! Lou, Lou! ah lubs you—yes, ah do."
- "Hell is paved with good intentions," he muttered, grinding his teeth. "God knows I'm there!"

Poor, restless, interfering spirit!
Poor little Lou!

#### CHAPTER XIII

#### RISING DOUBTS

"I cannot but remember such things were, That were most precious to me."

WHEN did the doubts begin to arise? Why did they arise? It was difficult to say exactly when and why, they were so subtle in their coming: but, under the same conditions which had heretofore proved all-enthralling, Hessie, looking back, could only conclude helplessly that they arose as soon as the opportunity was afforded them. The first two years of the new life had been too full of real hard work—work which engaged all her attention during the day and left her too healthily tired by night for anything else to be possible but the soundest oblivion; the third year had been too full of the first intoxicating novelty of complete artistic and social success—a ceaseless round of entertainments which, to a fresh heart and mind, were allabsorbing feasts, garnished with honeyed adulation and glittering emoluments; but the fourth year

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# Rising Doubts

gave old associations their first chance. hard work was all over then, the absolute fascination of brilliant novelty past. And then those scenes and people that had grown into her life with the growth of her body and soul, and that were therefore inevitably a part of her being, asserted their ineradicable power over her and made the siren secretly unhappy. She began, even amidst the brightest surroundings, to drop into fits of the dreamiest musing—when she would be suddenly startled to find herself comparing handsome establishments, beautiful palaces, unfavourably with the simple charm of the once despised Honeysuckle Cottage; when she would suddenly start up affrightedly because she caught herself drawing comparisons between the rough, ignorant villagers and the polished, intellectual nobility, which somehow commanded precedence for the former; when she would rouse herself shiveringly and seek instant diversion, because it seemed a gross sin to have left God's green country where she had been so hearty -God's country, in all its healthful peacefulness and purity—for man's town, with its artificial, injurious rush and brilliancy, under which she felt that she was steadily waning.

"I must not—oh, I must not!—let myself think like this!" she would always tell herself. "I was only existing before—I am *living* now! Surely it would have been wrong to try to do nothing, when

I knew I could do much. See! I have given pleasure to thousands and have made myself famous. Isn't that something?—something worth while? The Bible itself speaks of not burying your talents in a napkin."

But the thoughts persistently returned, for all her logic.

In her periodical communications with the woman in charge of the Honeysuckle Cottage, which had up to now been of a purely business character, she began to slip in questions about the school and forge. She was simply pining for news of both places, and could not forbear this surreptitious concession. It was in this way that she learnt that Mrs Mason was stricken down with rheumatic fever. "Who was nursing Mrs Mason?" "A nice young Irish girl, recently orphaned, who had come to the village to be with some relatives. and who had had much experience of illness," This nice young Irish girl annoyed Hessie intensely. "What had become of the painter's wife, Mrs Shaff?" (the woman who had before helped Hessie nurse Mrs Mason). "Mrs Shaff had departed this life six months ago."

Miss White herself sent Hessie a brief line when Mrs Mason's case became hopeless, and another when all was over. Hessie shed no tears for her old friend—somehow the blow seemed to have scorched all her tears up; but the loss rent her palpably.



# Rising Doubts

She put Miss White's two swiftly following notes in an envelope addressed to Mr Attwood, with a line from herself which begged him not to speak or write to her upon the matter, and posted it. Mr Attwood was puzzled by her supreme reticence, but he was pleased afterwards to note that she marked the death by a change in her dress.

Hessie longed to pour out her hidden sorrow and sympathy in letters to Tom and Miss White, but, remembering the latter's first note, decided that they would prefer her not to. Then she madly desired to set herself right in their eyes, but her hot, outraged pride struck the pen out of her hand the instant she attempted to do so. No. she could not condescend to defend herself!—the insult was too great, too wide of the mark! The truth would come out in the end-it always did. And it would come out with better effect if she now treated their outrageous delusions with silent, dignified contempt. So she contented herself with sending a huge, exquisitely wrought anchor of lilies and violets, bearing a plain card, on which was inscribed :--

"In ever tender and grateful remembrance, from a deeply sorrowing friend."

Tom showed it to Miss White — before he doubled it up and put it on the fire; while simple Irish Kate, all amazed, pleaded vainly for the

brief lives of those lovely, innocent blossoms. Poor Hessie! But she never knew of it, so she was "not robbed at all."

Her health did not improve. The groundwork of her face—its graceful contour and small, well-finished features—prevented her losing her right to that over-prized adjective, 'pretty'; but it became a terribly haggard prettiness as time went on. So much so, that at last the white cheeks were daintily rouged, the leaden lips subtly coloured, and the dim, gloomy eyes artfully touched up to bring back to them some semblance of their old humid brilliancy—when Hessie had to appear before her public and make a pleasing impression.

Her voice kept up its standard, however, and her popularity continued to increase. She had all the engagements she could manage without undue strain, and a great many more offered than she could comfortably accept. With her waning physical bloom, her attraction for the opposite sex seemed to deepen. The touch of pathos it gave her added to her winsomeness, and she might have closed her short, successful career as a public singer more than twice with a marriage which none, save royalty, need have despised.

But her suitors, amongst whom ranked Herr Ricksmar, accomplished no more than their pioneer, Lord Gaybright.



# Rising Doubts

Richard Attwood became more and more uneasy about her health.

- "If you don't begin to put on some flesh soon, Hessie," he said to her one day, "I shall have to get cross with you and adopt severe remedies."
- "Perhaps I am going into consumption." She smiled wearily. "I shall not put on flesh then, whatever you do."
  - "Consumption! Pshaw! What nonsense!"
  - "My mother died of it."
- "What of that? It doesn't always mean anything. You a singer, too! Why, their lungs are their strong point."
- "Sometimes. And, of course, they must be temporarily, at any rate, fairly good. But singers have before succumbed to lung troubles."
  - "Yes. Of course, accidents can happen to all."
  - "Yes. And a good many other things besides."
- "I don't believe you eat enough," he proceeded anxiously. "Do you?"
  - "I think so."
  - "Exercise enough?"
  - "I think so."
  - "Dress yourself properly?"

Hessie laughed rather forcedly. "I think so," she said again. "I have grown used to bare arms and shoulders, and the exposure no longer affects me in any way."

There was latent bitterness in the admission.

"Working too hard, then? Want a rest, perhaps?"

"No, no, no! To leave off and rest would kill me."

"How about the nights now?"

"Oh, fairly good."

"Well, we must consult Sir Henry Benton again and see what he recommends. I am not satisfied to have you go on like this."

"Oh no! It really isn't necessary," she irritably rejoined. "I am so sick of the question of my health!"

"But I am not. And I intend to take you again to Sir Henry, if I have to make a parcel of you and carry you there! Not that I think there is anything serious the matter with you—because, you know, he assured us before that there was nothing radically wrong; but he may suggest something new."

But Sir Henry Benton, hard pressed by Richard Attwood in their private interview after the second examination, only repeated his former opinion.

"No, there was no serious trouble. A certain amount of delicacy about the lungs, perhaps, which suggested precautions against cold and damp—but nothing alarming in itself. The cough was largely nervous. As to the general falling away—was Miss Lane worrying about anything, for instance? A troubled mind always feeds upon the flesh, you



# Rising Doubts

know." "No, Mr Attwood did not know of any special worry." "Ah, well! People often varied like this. Miss Lane would come round again; she must take care of herself, that's all. If she could be torn away from her clamorous public, he advised a complete change of air and scene by an escape of some duration to a warmer clime—say the south coast of France or Italy. It would undoubtedly hasten the coming round."

But Miss Lane could not be torn away from her clamorous public. A busy winter lay before her, and she was feverishly eager to work, work, work. She promised, and did take every care of herself; but, although she kept briskly up and about, the old plumpness and glow could not be lured back again.

Mr Attwood began to wonder if she were privately troubled because there was no comfortably definite end to her public career to look forward to, especially as she evidently had unacknowledged doubts of her health. She had rejected, to his knowledge, three admirable settlements in life—Lord Gaybright, Herr Ricksmar, and Mr Millions. She could not be thinking of Tom in that way now—it was altogether too incongruous. Could it be that she loved him—Richard Attwood? It looked like it, certainly. Well, he must play the part an unkind Fate had assigned him to its crushing conclusion, and

manfully set her mind at ease. So he wrote asking her for a private interview, and at it said gently, almost listlessly:

"Would you like to become engaged to me now, Hessie?"

He was roused out of his apathy by her starting from her chair in a panic, and falling tremblingly back into it.

"Don't get agitated, dear," he went on with quick relief—there was no misunderstanding Hessie's emotion. "There's not the ghost of a cause for it. Everything is to be exactly as you wish, remember—only exactly as you wish."

She struggled with herself and spoke.

"Thank you," she said faintly. "You are all kindness. Don't think me ungrateful—but not yet, not yet!"

"All right. There, there!" he returned pleasantly. "I can never think you ungrateful, Hessie, and you please me best when you frankly let me know your heart. Why, you breathe as if you had been running for a race instead of listening to a humble servant who merely inquires your wishes. Let us change the subject. We go to the Countess of Harbringer's to-night, don't we?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You like the Countess, don't you?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Very much. I am always glad to go there."



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- "That's right. She is a favourite of mine."
- "An old friend, isn't she?"
- "Yes, an old, staunch friend. Feel in good voice, Hessie?"
  - "Oh yes!"
  - "Good! And what are we going to wear?"
  - "Black."
- "Well, there's nothing nicer, I think. And my pearls are to be honoured, I hope?"
  - "I shall wear them, but the honour is mine."
- "Shall I send you in some flowers, or are you already provided with them?"
- "A good many have come, but they are all coloured."
  - "I'll send you some lilies and narcissus, then."
  - "Thank you."
  - "And now I must be off."

Later, at the Countess of Harbringer's, Richard Attwood, with Hessie on his arm, was passing behind a group of young men, and this subdued conversation reached their disengaged ears:

"Little Hessie Lane! Yes, very pretty and winning, but looks careworn. Black doesn't suit her, I suppose. Why on earth has she taken to wearing it? Is the blacksmith dead?"

Hessie stopped abruptly, stung out of her conventional calm.

"No, his mother," she said in a hard, clear tone. They turned, dumbfoundered, and, recovering

themselves, apologised with incoherent confusion. Hessie bowed icily, and, with a set, frowning face, passed on.

"My dear child!" expostulated her companion in an undertone. "How could you commit such a gaucherie?"

"How could they, you mean!" she angrily returned.

"No, I think not. It's a breach of etiquette, isn't it, to notice conversation not meant for your ears?"

"What right have they to discuss my private affairs?" she muttered hotly. "How do they come to know them? They should be brought to a sense of their impertinence, I think."

"My dear, you mustn't forget that you are a public character. The lives of such gradually and inevitably become, in every detail, the possession of a public which feels at liberty to discuss all given to it."

"Tom hasn't given himself to it."

"No. But they only discuss him in reference to you."

"Then he is degraded by me, poor fellow!"

"Degraded?" Richard Attwood's heart beat quickly.

"Yes. To expose to common, heartless gossip something which is naturally of sacred interest is to degrade. Ah! here's the Signor trying to



# Rising Doubts

plough his way towards us! My turn to sing again, I suppose. I'm glad . . . . I want to get it over and go home . . . . I'm tired."

Mr Attwood came in with her when he took her home, saying hurriedly that there was something he wished to ask before they parted that night.

"But I must beg you first to let me break the bond of silence you have laid upon me, Hessie. May I?"

- " If it's necessary," she answered shrinkingly.
- "Hessie! are you fretting over Tom?"
- "No," she said hardly. She paused a moment, and then went on, with a hysterical laugh:
- "You haven't heard all the news, or you would not ask me. A nice young Irish girl nursed Mrs Mason in her last illness, and I have no doubt she is now putting the finishing touch to her good work by comforting Tom!"
  - "Merely your surmise, isn't it?"
  - "Yes. But true, I'm sure."
  - "How have you heard all this?"
- "Through the woman at the cottage. I've been asking her about them lately."
  - "Why?" He put the question swiftly, eagerly.
- "Oh, I don't know. Out of idle curiosity, I suppose."
  - "You—you don't want to go back to them?"
    She laughed as before.

"What, and leave all this?" with a sweeping gesture of both arms.

"No, of course not. Idiocy on my part to have asked you, eh? Good night, my child."

"Good night."

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"And leave all this?" Hessie thought, walking through the pretty rooms to her charming little bedroom and taking note of all her treasures as she walked. "And leave all this?" she thought again, as she put aside her handsome gown and gleaming jewels. "And leave all this?" she thought for the third time, as she sank on her knees at the bedside and her eyes fell on the massive little box on the table at the bed-head, which held many precious letters and a comfortable supply of coins and notes of the realm.

There followed a sudden queer cessation of all thought and feeling; then a choking gasp, a flood of tears, and Hessie sobbed out:

"Yes! yes! I'd give it all—all!.... never to have had the chance—never to have had the chance!"



#### CHAPTER XIV

#### THE BLACKSMITH'S DISDAIN

"'Tis not my talent to conceal my thoughts, Or carry smiles and sunshine in my face, When discontent sits heavy at my heart."

IT was three months after Mrs Mason's death that Tom at last decided to gratify a desire which, though resolutely ignored up to now, had been growing in his troubled breast with giant strides. He wanted to see Hessie once more—he felt he could not settle down resignedly, as, of course, he must do, until he had seen her again. He had no idea of an interview with her-it would be much too painful on both sides—but he wished, himself unseen, to look upon the changed girl who had taken all the effervescence from his life; perhaps he vaguely thought the sight would do him good. He had read weekly many flattering newspaper accounts of her, and he couldn't picture her at all in the gorgeous setting of rich garments and jewels, so easily possessing herself of the rapt

attention of hundreds and hundreds of people, or the honoured, tranquil guest at feasts where titles were the order of the day. That she had sung before the Queen, and could, according to newspaper innuendo, ally herself with the upper ten if she so chose, added immensely to the unreality of it all. Hessie!... who used to be his little Hessie, altogether his! Surely it was impossible! Perhaps, though, he would realise it if he saw her.

So three months after he had laid his beloved mother in her grave, this carefully hidden and hard-fought longing rising up and unexpectedly mastering him. Tom determined to lay the struggle by a visit to the great city of which he had read His feeling towards Richard Attwood had inevitably undergone some modification: he no longer had any thought of seeking him out, now that he was free, and making him answer for all the misery he had caused, because the calmer, truer reasoning of enforced time made him see. what he had been blind to before, that to create a scandal would be to harm Hessie seriously - for, no doubt, they had made things appear right to the world—and Tom was man enough to shrink from retaliating upon a woman, however much she had wronged him. Indeed, he earnestly prayed that he and Richard Attwood might not meet, for Tom felt that, brought face to face, he could not answer for himself. He would see and hear



Hessie, a quiet, deeply covered drop of water in the tumultuous sea of one of her audiences, in a part of the house where there was no likelihood of his meeting the man who had fed and struck him.

So, against all Miss White's arguments and entreaties, and those of many relatives and friends, Tom found a proxy to represent him at the forge, and departed for London. He lodged himself at an unpretentious inn, and consulted the papers in order to post himself on Hessie's appearance in public. She sang the night after his arrival, and Tom sat in the gallery of the big hall, well to the back.

Tom was never afterwards able to say who the singers were who preceded and followed Hessie, or what they sang—although, as a lover of music, both artists and songs should have been memorable. He only knew that he kept his eyes and attention busy by continually consulting his programme, and that, as the moment for Hessie's first appearance drew nearer and nearer until it was at hand, his thickly beating pulses seemed suddenly to pause, and a dizzy sickness took possession of him and obscured his vision. The accompanist had followed the last singer out, and was now emerging from that mysterious side door, deferentially leading Hessie forward by the hand. A dainty little figure in an exquisite gown of the

palest heliotrope and richest lace, with amethysts glistening in her hair and on her neck and arms, and a trailing bouquet of fern-encompassed orchids in her white-gloved hand. She wore half-mourning only now for Mrs Mason, and the jewels and flowers were Richard Attwood's gifts. Tom, with an involuntary gasp, pulled himself sharply together, and raised to his eyes the one extravagance of his London trip—a powerful pair of opera-glasses. His fingers trembled so that he had no little difficulty in focussing them; at last they were properly fixed, however, and he gazed at her searchingly.

The first clear sight of her was a severe shock a shock which acknowledged nothing familiar in the pretty vision.

"That wasn't Hessie! They must have made some mistake. How the people applauded!" He looked helplessly at his programme, and the familiar name stared back at him. "Could it be Hessie? No!...yes!" He had looked for and discovered a well-remembered chip in one of her pretty teeth and two little moles to the left side of her chin. "And surely nobody else's hair grew quite so low and thickly about the brow with exactly the same number of coquettish rings of hair about the temples? And had somebody else that same trick of tossing the head? And there, allowing for the ravages of the new life, were the



familiar features, looking strange at first, because their former healthy glow and plumpness was gone. How painfully thin she was altogether! deadly white!—except for that faint, artificial pink on her cheeks and lips and the dark smudges under her saddened eyes. Those eyes bore no resemblance in expression to the ones he used to praise so tirelessly, yet in shape and colour they were the Then what a difference the dress made in How it transformed her!" Tom's eves her! rested momentarily on the well-exposed arms and shoulders, and he coloured hotly. To his unaccustomed eyes it seemed so shameless. She was nothing to him now, yet he felt inconsistently that in so degrading herself before all these people she was humiliating him. He bent his eyes quickly on the printed sheet in his hand. What was she singing? He listened intently, with downcast eyes, but could make no sense of it. It was an Italian song. It was encored, of course—turbulently encored—and, in response, she sung one of those sweet, simple little ballads well known and beloved by king and peasant. "How her voice had improved! It had seemed perfection before, yet it had been nothing to this."

She left the platform amid the combined noise of ecstatically agitated hands, feet, sticks and umbrellas, and Tom waited with tense nerves and an introspective mind for her second and last appearance that evening. It came in due time, and she gave

them Elizabeth's prayer from *Tannhäuser*—gave it magnificently. The enthusiasm of her audience mounted accordingly, and she was not allowed to leave the platform until she had graciously added the plaintive, ever pleasing:

"'Way down upon de Swanee ribber, Far, far away, Dere's whar ma heart is turning ebber, Dere's whar de ole folks stay."

Then Tom rose gently, and quietly made his way out of the hall.

"One little hut among de bushes, One dat I love, Still sadly to my memory rushes No matter where I rove."

He wanted to laugh as the words came back to him and the irony of it all struck him freshly; but he felt he had better not—some laughter lies too close to tears to be indulged in safely. Far better not.

What feeling she had put into those simple little words! All false, all feigned! Were all women natural born actresses?

He wasn't at all sleepy; so he thought, before seeking his modest quarters, that he would take an idle ramble through the quiet streets, with his sombre thoughts for company. Thus he was no sooner well out of the hall than he turned down a side street. Was it Fate or Chance?

The streets were fairly free as yet: the concert he



had just left was by no means over, and there was no other place of entertainment just near; even had there been, it was too early for the general exits. He had only taken a few slow paces down the street, and was, as yet, alongside the recently quitted hall, when a carriage drew up, and a side door of the building opened. Two ladies and two gentlemen came out. Tom drew back to let them pass. The first couple was an elderly lady and a younger man: Mrs Greyson was, of course, a stranger to Tom, but he knew Richard Attwood instinctively -for he had hardly glanced at him. He turned his eyes swiftly on the following couple a few paces behind-Hessie, on Signor Martelli's arm. Greyson and Mr Attwood did not notice Tom, the former stepping at once into the carriage, and the latter chatting to her at the door; but, as ill-luck would have it, Signor Martelli and Hessie met Tom's rapid, nervous glance fully. It was useless to turn back; she recognised him as quickly as if she had had an appointment to meet him there.

"Tom!" she gasped, pausing instantly.

He raised his hat, and, oblivious of etiquette, stepped hurriedly past her, cursing in no measured terms his thoughtless choice of a thoroughfare. Hessie tore her hand from the Signor's gallantly compressing arm.

"Tell them I've just caught sight of a friend and must have a word in private with him," she

panted, pushing the astonished little man towards the carriage. "I won't be a minute."

She ran after Tom, and caught him by the arm. "Well?" he said, facing her.

They both breathed unnaturally fast; they looked at each other sternly, and the lips of both quivered ominously — yet their voices were outwardly calm and low.

"You must come and see me to-morrow morning," she said. "Any time after nine-thirty. I shall be alone. You know the address. It is important."

"I can't come," he doggedly returned.

"You can—and must!" she persisted.

"I'm going home to-morrow early," he said, on a reckless impulse.

"You must wait over and see me, then. I demand it."

"Oh, what's the use?" he irritably rejoined.
"For Heaven's sake let us spare ourselves!"

"No! I don't want to be 'spared,' as you call it, and I don't intend to spare you. Will you come?"

"Believe me, it is better to say good-bye now. What cursed luck that we should run across each other!"

"No, no! I won't leave you, Tom, until you promise to call on me in the morning—upon my soul, I won't! You still keep your promises, don't you?"
"Yes."

"Then say you'll come—in justice!"



"To me?" he asked bitterly.

"No! To me!"

"All right."

She ran back to the carriage. Those awaiting her now realised what had occurred, for the Signor easily guessed who Tom was, and Mr Attwood confirmed him on hearing his description of the rude, all-swaying stranger. But Hessie's face and manner, as she rejoined them, did not invite comment, and all were uncomfortably silent. Hessie spoke, however, on taking leave of Richard Attwood, motioning him first aside.

"That was Tom," she said dully, "as I see you have all guessed. He was rough; but I have extorted an interview from him."

"Why?"

"Because he must not think worse of me than I deserve."

"Again, why? I thought we had agreed that it didn't matter."

"Oh, I don't know. Weakness on my part, I suppose."

"Well, Hessie, I think I had better be present at the interview. He will probably be rougher then."

"No, no. I promised him that he should see me alone."

"I don't think it wise."

"I can't help it. I insist upon it!" she excitedly cried. "I'm not afraid."

- "Very well. Don't let him upset you."
- "I shan't. Good night."
- "When is he coming?"
- "To-morrow morning, any time after half-past nine."
  - "May I look in in the afternoon?"
- "No, I think not. To-morrow is one of my resting days, and I shall want a quiet afternoon after Tom. Look in the following day."
  - "All right. Good-night."

So another long famine of suspense faced Richard Attwood! Nevertheless, he faced it willingly, because suspense was leavened with hope.

Hessie was dressed in her plainest morningdress, a clinging robe of the palest grey, when Tom was shown into her drawing-room, where she awaited him the next morning. Her hair was dressed as in the old village days, and she was guiltless of ornament, save for the simple folds of soft white lace about her throat, amidst which a bunch of fragrant violets nestled. She had even contemplated leaving her face alone, but her glass said it was too ghastly, so it was tinted-but only very slightly so. The interview, for all their inward pulsations, began in a commonplace manner enough. On his being announced, Hessie put her work quietly aside, rose gracefully, and taking a slow step or two forward, greeted him easily, with outstretched hand.



"Ah, good morning, Tom!" she said. "Thank you so much for not disappointing me and for coming early. And now for our chat. Will you sit here?"

Tom was forced to take her hand, because the maid had not then left the room: and, having touched it, a great deal of his independence—certainly his independence in small matters—subtly deserted him. He sat down in the chair she indicated, and did not push it back when she took one close by. Hessie did not resume her work; she crossed her knees, and interlaced her hands around them. She looked at Tom very steadily, as steadily as he studied the view from the window.

- "Have you been long in London, Tom?" she began.
  - "No. Only a day."
  - "You came up on business, I suppose?"
  - "No. For-well, for pleasure."
- "Pleasure? And you were going back this morning?"
  - "Why not? I only came to hear you sing."
  - "You were at the concert last night, then?"
  - "Ves."
- "You must have left it prematurely. Weren't you enjoying it?"
- " I came out immediately after your last song. I was impatient to think it all out quietly."

- "Well, Tom, what did you think? My voice has improved, hasn't it?"
  - "Wonderfully."
  - "And I myself? Would you have known me?"
  - "No . . . . I didn't at first."
  - " Why?"

He locked his hands together, and gave them an involuntary wring. His eyes wandered from the window and rested on his hands as he answered, with an effort:

- "Because you have grown so thin . . . . and white . . . . and sad . . . . and grand!"
- "Y-es. I suppose so. But I'm not grand this morning, am I, Tom? I'm simple enough to be back in the Honeysuckle Cottage."

He glanced fleetingly at her now lady-like, feeble looking little hands.

- "You'd have to keep a servant if you were," he said.
  - "Why?"
- "You'd not be able now to keep things up to the mark yourself."

She laughed pathetically.

- "Only a little bit out of practice, Tom," she said, "that's all. I'd soon get into it again. You have changed too."
  - "Yes. Are you surprised?"

She shivered, ignoring otherwise the question.

"But I should have known you, Tom!" she



proceeded reproachfully. "Why, anywhere. It's not been so long as that to me!"

"Yes. You see I'm not disguised."

"Disguised?"

He looked her over with the bitterest contempt, making her blood surge hotly through her, to leave her colder than before. She changed the subject.

"What do you think of this new home of mine, ...
Tom?"

He swept it with his eyes.

- "It's very handsome," he replied.
- "And the big hall last night? Wasn't it fine?"
  - "Very fine."
- "And my dress and jewels? Weren't they beautiful?"
  - "Very beautiful."
- "Doesn't it seem strange to see me in such settings, Tom? Sometimes I can't realise it mysels."
- "Yes, very strange. I couldn't picture it at all; so I came up to see."
- "Have you read all the newspaper reports of me?"
  - "Pretty well all,"
- "Then you know all about me. There's nothing left to tell."
  - "No. I suppose not."

- "And yet you haven't given me a word of congratulation, Tom!"
  - "I can't. I'm sorry—but—I can't!"
- "Well, I'll come back to that later. Tell me now all the news from home. How's Miss White?"

In spite of everything, Hessie was feverishly, recklessly enjoying this private talk with her deserted, unforgiving, and mistaken lover, who was still the only man she had ever loved.

- " Miss White is very well."
- "And my darling Guardian?"
- "Quite himself again. Would you like to have him back?"
- "No, no! He might droop again. Have—have you still Filos, Tom?"

Tom gave his hands another wring, as he slowly answered:

- "I gave him away . . . . after you left . . . . Miss White took him . . . . but he wouldn't settle. He came back again and again."
  - "And then you let him stay?"
  - "Ves."
- "Dogs are finer creatures than human beings. Don't you think so, Tom?"
  - "Finer than most, perhaps."
- "Tom!" Hessie faltered. "I haven't said a word to you yet about your great loss—but I have mourned with you, and for you, most truly!"

She ended with a little sob, and he looked at her kindly for the first time.

- "Thank you," he said simply.
- "Do you still live in the house?"
- "Yes."
- "Who cooks your meals and keeps it tidy for you?"
- "I get my meals with mother's sister—the carpenter's wife, you remember? And as she lives close by, she and her girls keep the house neat for me between them."
  - "Your mother was well nursed, of course?"
- "Splendidly. An Irish girl came to the village after you left, to stay with some relatives, who were friends of mother's. She took a fancy to mother, and insisted on nursing her, saying she was as good as a professional. And so she was."
  - "You must feel very grateful to her."
  - " I do."
  - "What is her name?"
  - "Kate Lawless."
  - "Is she pretty?"
- "Not exactly. But she has a good, bright face, and she's an honest, kindly little soul, and as neat as a pin."
- "Have you forgotten my name, Tom? It seems like it."
  - "No. But I don't know what to call you."
  - "Call me what you used to call me."

"No, no! I've no right. And somehow, after all that's gone, I can't manage 'Miss Lane.'"

"Do you despise me, Tom?"

He started, and looked about him desperately.

"I—I thought you had something important to say to me," he stammered.

"So I have. I'm leading up to it. Tom! you are all doing me a horrible, horrible injustice! I am guilty of having deserted you in order to gratify my ambition to become a public singer, but of nothing else! The wrong you have done me in your thoughts is far, far greater than the wrong I did you, and I demand an apology."

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

"Yes. Don't you believe me?"

"I was foolish enough to believe you once, and I'm afraid I can never be so again."

Her attitude grew more tense, and she quivered from head to foot as if she had been shot. Her nostrils dilated, and the dim eyes began to blaze. There was a momentary pause, and then she burst out:

"How dare you, you coward! How dare you, you bare-faced slanderer!"

"I am sorry," he humbly, but quite calmly, returned, "that you have forced me to say this to your face. Why you wouldn't spare yourself and me this useless, painful talk, is more than I can understand."



- "Are you aware that I have sung privately before her Majesty the Queen?"
  - "Yes."
- "Are you aware that a worthy peer of the realm has entreated me to become his wife?"
  - "I heard so."
- "Are you aware that the man you vilely traduce with me is ready and anxious to marry me?"
  - " No."
- "Well, it is so. And do you think a woman of the class you consider me would receive such honours? How does the situation strike you now?"
- "I think Richard Attwood is a clever devil, also, it seems, a generous devil, and I advise you to take him at his word at once and marry him!"

Hessie sprang forward, a deadly passion consuming her, and rang the bell violently.

"Show this man out," she said to the maid.

Tom had risen when she did, and now he turned commandingly towards the maid.

"I will let myself out, thank you. Please leave the room."

Her mistress's silence giving consent, the wondering girl withdrew.

Then Tom walked up to Hessie and seized her hands.

"Listen, Hessie!" he cried impressively. "I've

spoken the rough truth to you, because, since you would have it, I thought it best to get it over and done with. But don't mistake me! If any man breathed in my hearing what I've just allowed I believe of you, I'd tear him to pieces and grind him to dust. Yes, I've confessed to you what I'd confess to no other living creature, and listen to quietly from no one! And another thing. You're rich and grand now: but the world has its ups and downs-so remember this. If you ever want food and drink, I'll give them to you . . . . if you ever want clothing, I'll get it for you . . . . if you ever need a shelter, I'll find it for you. If there's ever anything I can do in any way to help or shield you, I'll do it. I haven't smiled at you, talked compliments to you, or congratulated you - but I'll forgive you, and I'll stand by you for ever. Good-bye."

She loved him, and what will not a woman's love overlook? In the moment of their parting she passed over his unwarrantable contumely she considered only that he was good and kind and dear to her, and that he was passing for ever She crept closer to him, and out of her life! humbly raised her face to his. But he dropped her hands and turned away.

"No!" he said. "Your paint would-poison me!"

She was alone some minutes before she even



attempted to move. Then she took a few dizzy steps forward, and stooped over Tom's chair.

"He has forgotten his gloves," she vaguely murmured, taking them up. "Shall I call him back? No, I think not. How strange that he should bother with gloves! I suppose he wanted to be quite correct in every particular—he was very nicely dressed. I'll keep them." She looked at them intently; she smoothed them out tenderly; she was raising them to her lips—when she suddenly paused, laughing hysterically.

"No!" she cried to the surrounding air, and pressing the gloves passionately against her breast, "my paint might—poison them!"

### CHAPTER XV

#### THE BIRTH OF THE DREAM-WOMAN

"Mine honour is my life; both grow in one; Take honour from me, and my life is done."

Well, everything went on as before, and the unexpected and violent disturbance of Tom's visit faded as swiftly as it had arisen. Whether it was really dead and buried, or only latent, was the question which harassed Richard Attwood. As time went on, certain circumstances inclined him, only too willingly, to the latter supposition.

For instance, Hessie would make no further engagements from that date, and she even cancelled some of the less important ones for which she was already booked. When pressed for a reason, she reluctantly admitted that she felt she could not go on as before, and that she believed, unless she began to feel better in the meantime, she would, on the completion of her big engagements in the immediate future, take a good long rest. The need of this seemed at last to have come home to



her. But when France and Italy were suggested as the most beneficial and interesting of recruiting grounds, she impatiently shook her head.

"No, she didn't wish to go to either country, didn't wish to leave England." "What arrangements could Richard Attwood make for her, then?" "None, as regarded her place of destination—she was not decided; but he might see about subletting the flat furnished for her, if he would be so good, and about procuring another engagement for Mrs Greyson." "Surely she would take Mrs Greyson away with her?" "No, she had quite made up her mind to go away alone."

"A temporary engagement was wanted for Mrs Greyson, then?" "Well, better say permanent; she might prolong her holiday indefinitely, and desired to feel free of all ties." "Would she not tell Richard Attwood where she thought of going?" "Yes, she would before she left." And then with irritable intolerance she abruptly terminated the interview.

It was some time before Hessie admitted him to her fullest confidence—not, indeed, until the eve of her departure. The flat had then been sub-let furnished to a thoroughly satisfactory couple who were only too glad to take over as well the two maids. The big engagements had all been most successfully accomplished, and the papers were full of references to Miss Lane's proposed temporary

retirement for the re-establishment of her health, which had given way under the plucky ardour with which she had pursued her exhaustingly brilliant career; they touched upon the fact that the place of Miss Lane's proposed withdrawal was evidently intended to be kept a secret in order that she might enjoy the more complete rest from publicity, as no information could be gained on that score; and they closed by cordially wishing Miss Lane a speedy recovery and return to her gratefully sympathising public, etc., etc.

Mrs Greyson had been provided with another and as comfortable a berth, and had tearfully departed to it; so Hessie sat alone in her drawingroom when Richard Attwood was shown in by appointment, to receive that final disclosure.

He was guilty of starting when she rose and greeted him—yes, through all his worldly accumulation of savoir-faire. She merely laughed, and at once easily answered that gauche frankness on his part.

"I look not a little ghastly, unpainted, unpowdered, and unfrizzed, with no fine feathers upon me to disguise the natural scare-crow, don't I?" she said. "I was frightened at myself at first, but I quickly got used to the change—and I feel so much more comfortable and honest! You see, where I am going for my long holiday, Mr Attwood, the people are perfect Goths: they would



find nothing to admire in a painted, powdered face, and frizzed, tortured hair; both would seem utterly ridiculous to them—and one does not like to feel oneself an object of ridicule! And as for the fine feathers, I am afraid they would think my best gowns hardly respectable, and the others quite too idiotically peacockish; and, again, one does not relish being thought shameless or silly. So I have made my concessions to those dear, old-world Goths, and I am trying to accustom myself to carry off the transformation without self-consciousness. This ugly dark serge dress, short and untrimmed, will appeal to them as being sensibly serviceable—I had it made for the purpose—and my poor worn face quite undisguised will merely excite their compassion. I assure you, it would never occur to them to say, like their more polished brethren, "What a fright!" They will only say, "Poor thing, how ill she looks!" know it—I ought to know it, having been one of them. So you see, Mr Attwood, I have taken care of my vanity: it will not be disturbedalthough I am too ill and tired to pander to it any more!"

She laughed again, and her fluent sarcasm coursed through him like electric shocks, upsetting and bewildering all the centres of his being.

"Do sit down," she said wearily.

He mechanically took the chair she indicated,

still staring helplessly at her. She subsided on the rug at his feet.

"I suppose I ought to feel ashamed to sit on the floor before you," she went on lightly, "but I don't in the least—not in this short, rough frock, with my hair dressed as simply as a school-girl's. It's undignified, I know, but I like it, I always did, and I am not so very old—anyway, I'm done with pretence now!"

He fell back weakly in his chair, and she looked him over with a reckless whimsicalness, bordering on hysteria.

"How hopelessly at sea you look, Mr Attwood! I puzzle you, and no wonder, since I puzzle myself. Come! Paddle yourself to land as soon as you like—here I am quite ready and willing, even impatient, to answer any question that suggests itself to you. Help me to unravel the mystery of my wretched, wretched self!"

He suddenly leaned forward, and compassionately laid his hand on her head.

"You are ill, Hessie," he said anxiously; "and when we are out of sorts, mole-hills always appear to us as mountains. Calm yourself, dear -there is really nothing to worry over-nothing whatever."

She intolerantly shook herself free of his touch.

"I'm not ill!" she said angrily. "I'm only 236

feverishly impatient to unburden my conscience to you. Question me, help me! . . . at once! Oh, begin, begin!"

"All right. Steady. We shall soon have you your old cherry little self again. Meanwhile, suppose you begin by telling me where you intend to spend your long, well-earned holiday? Where is this wonderful place, Hessie?"

She looked at him defiantly, and answered sullenly:

"I have decided to go home."

He started.

"Home!" he echoed. "To-to Grassville?"

"Yes, to Grassville. Back to the Honeysuckle Cottage."

He made his concession to her temper of the moment, and put forth his protest very humbly.

"Do you really think that is a wise decision to have come to, Hessie?"

"Well, why not?"

"Just think a moment, dear. You will inevitably be subjected to unpleasantness, possibly to unkindness, if you go back there; and much as you have risen above those poor villagers, you are too innately sensitive for it not to have a distressing effect on you. Such a holiday would be productive of no good, and of grave harm, I think."

She laughed as she had laughed twice before.

"I'm not afraid of unpleasantness, or even of unkindness," she said hardly. "Indeed, I quite relish the idea of it. After all the adulation I have received here, it will be a wholesome change."

"Don't be wilful, Hessie!" he urged sharply. "Be reasonable, and let us hit upon a happier place for you to recuperate in. Grassville won't do at all—unless you deliberately want to tax further your already over-taxed system."

She suddenly drooped her head low, and began nervously to pluck at the shaggy rug on which she was reposing; her manner and voice completely altered — were steady and grave — as she said slowly:

"We—we haven't begun to understand each other yet. It—it is far more serious than you realise."

His breathing quickened, and his inquiring eyes grew more searching.

"Come! Tell me all, child!" he entreated, "without further delay."

"I will."

Her restless hand did not pause, but she raised her head and looked at him with wet eyes and quivering lips.

"Mr Attwood, you have given me a magnificently self-glorifying time of it here—so stupendous altogether that there are no words in which to

express all I feel upon the subject. But you do know that I have been very, very happy, very, very proud here, and always very, very grateful to you, don't you?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I am afraid what I am going on to say will not sound in keeping with the assertion of my happiness, pride, and gratitude in all that you have done for me—but indeed, indeed, it does not affect it at all. Pray believe that!"

"All right, all right, little woman! Go on."

"Mr Attwood, in leaving the Honeysuckle Cottage, I—I left behind me something which I thought I could do quite well without, but which I have lately discovered is—indispensable to me. It cannot come to me, or be brought to me, or be sent to me; so I must go to it, because I have learnt that I cannot live without it. And it is centered — permanently centered — in the Honeysuckle Cottage!"

"Then this so-called holiday of yours—?" he asked. "It will be—be a——"

"Will be a permanent one—so far as my public career is concerned. I have taken my fill of the delights of public success, and, because of the absence of this one thing, the brilliant fire of my glory in them has gradually—very gradually, I am bound to confess—burnt itself out to a heap of cold grey ashes!"

"Hessie!" he cried.

She drooped her head again, struggling to maintain calmness.

"It will be quite useless to argue with me," she stumbled on. "You will only drive me mad, if you try. I have sold most of my jewels and all my grand dresses and knick-knacks. I possess nothing now unsuitable to the Honeysuckle Cottage -except the Queen's bracelet. I cannot, cannot go on with my life here! . . . . every nerve in my body is shrieking out for the old obscure life, fighting desperately against this glittering one which made me turn traitress to my plighted word! You don't know-you can't know-how keenly I long to cook my own dinners and scrub my own floors again, amidst those rough, honest simpletons and that pure air . . . . I want to do it — with a deathless determination!... because there, and there only, lies awaiting me my abandoned---"

He stooped eagerly forward and seized her roughly by the shoulder.

"What?" he panted. "Your abandoned what, child?"

"Self-respect!"

She covered her face with her hands and gave way utterly to her hitherto partly restrained tears. He sprang up and walked to the window, and she thought she heard him mutter—only it seemed so

unlikely — "A Daniel! A Daniel come to judgment!"

He had found his dream-woman, but she did not know it yet. How to tell her? how best to tell her?—that was the question throbbing through him.

She rose in a moment or two and followed him.

"Don't—don't think me reproachful or ungrateful!" she sobbed wildly, laying an appealing "Think me weak, fanciful, hand on his arm. capricious, vacillating—anything but that! There is no taint of either feeling in all my miserable body, upon my soul and honour! But I must go back, or something tells me-instinct, I suppose -keeps telling me, that I shall go mad or die. Oh, Mr Attwood, be merciful and generous! Say that you know I am not reproaching you, or casting away lightly and ungratefully the splendid career you have so benevolently given me . . . . say that you forgive me all the disappointment I am causing you—that you understand me—and let me go in peace!"

She laid her head dizzily upon his arm, and bathed it with uncontrollable tears.

He seized her hands fiercely, and drawing gently away from her, forced her to face him.

"Look up, little Hessie!" he cried tenderly, jubilantly. "Look at me, my child! Do I look disappointed or annoyed?"

She looked at him shrinkingly, and he laughed happily as he met her unwilling eyes.

"Why, no!" she faltered amazedly. "Your face looks quite—quite irradiated. Are—are you only acting to encourage me, or — or is it all quite true?"

"All quite true, quite true, my queen!" His voice rang out exultantly. "There's been nothing truer about me for years and years and years than the unalloyed joy and pride you now see in my face—a joy and pride which your renunciation of your new life for the old one has alone given me, and could alone, of all the possibilities in this wide, wide world, give me! 'Oh, wise young judge! How I do honour thee!'" He bent his head, and fervently kissed the cold little hands he still so tightly held.

"Ah, it is my turn now to puzzle you!" he proceeded gleefully, as he again met her now anxiously questioning eyes. "How hopeless at sea you look, little Hessie! Let me row you to the shore, my noble, brave, true-hearted girl!"

He drew her to him and encircled her with his arm, for she was trembling violently in her utter bewilderment. He led her to the sofa, and when she sat down, he knekt at her feet, taking her hands again into his own.

"Oh Hessie, Hessie! You don't know what, you have done for me!" he said with emotion,

looking earnestly at her. "And I must try to control my proud happiness and explain things to you quickly. It has come to pass, it has come to pass!"

He paused a moment, and resolutely choked down his rebellious enthusiasm, and then went on:

"Do you remember our first meeting, Hessie—in the porch of the Honeysuckle Cottage?" he-asked.

"Why, yes!" She faintly smiled.

"In every particular, dear?"

"N-o, perhaps not," she faltered,—"but still vividly enough."

"You may remember, then, that when I spoke to you of myself I acknowledged that I was a weary cynic, because I was a middle-aged worldling and had not yet met the woman of my dreams?"

"Yes, I remember that quite well."

"But I didn't describe to you the woman of my dreams, did I, child?"

She shook her head.

"Well, listen now! An incorruptible woman—a woman who could not be weaned from the path of faith and duty for any self-gratification, however strong and dazzling—a woman who could resist the fiercest temptation, however long it was brought to bear upon her, out of respect to her sense of duty and her given word. She was necessary to my faith in human nature, to my

pleasure in life; and I sought her—almost everywhere—in vain!"

Her interest was awakened, but she was still far from understanding him: he saw that in her attentive face.

"Can you recall what you said when I told you that I had not met the woman of my dreams?" he went on.

Again she shook her head.

"You said, 'Find her,' and I said, 'I'm too tired now!'"

"Yes, yes! I do remember it," she cried.

"But as I talked on with you, little Hessie, you unconsciously emboldened me to make another attempt to discover her—in you!"

She became conscious of a glimmer of dawn, and acknowledged it by starting violently.

"Steady!" he cried, tightening his grip of her hands. "There was your wonderful voice to tempt you with, and your proud assertion that you had weighed all the great things your father hoped for you in the balance with Tom Mason 'and found them wanting' to scare all thought of failure away. Everything encouraged me, heart and brain-sick as I was, to make one more attempt. The opportunity was too good, in every detail, to be passed by."

The day was breaking for her now, and she began to shiver piteously over it.

"So—God forgive me!—I tempted you, Hessie. I did it well, did I not? You never suspected my sincerity?"

" N-o," she mechanically returned. " I—I never suspected you. How—how could I?"

"When you turned your back on your village home and friends and lover, you hurt me most, I think, Hessie. Yet I was resolved, so long as you were happy and settled in your new life, that you should never, never even dream of the truth."

The day was with her now: its blazing sun seemed to be mercilessly beating upon her tortured, awe-inspired brain. She wrenched her hands away and passed them affrightedly over her hot, damp face.

"I did dream of it, though," she faintly murmured, pushing him from her,—"on the night before I left the Honeysuckle Cottage! Ah, God!"

She rose dizzily, and took a few uncertain steps forward. "So it was all a trick," she continued, speaking with difficulty. "A trick that failed!" She laughed hysterically. "I was not your dream-woman after all. Poor you!" She turned and looked at him mockingly. "Cruel you!"

He stepped close to her: he did not like the death-like look on her face, or the slightly swaying motion of her body.

"You are my dream-woman!" he fiercely, jealously asserted. "Doubly, trebly my dream-woman! For you have tasted fully the sweets of a life of self, and yet, without any encouragement, you are going back to your self-respect! I don't know how to do you sufficient honour!"

There was a pause, during which they stared at each other, fascinated.

"Well, I'm glad you have at last found her," she muttered slowly, dully. "Will you kindly leave her now to think matters out? Poor little thing!"

Her involuntary self-pity struck him home. He stretched out his hands to her beseechingly.

- "Hessie, forgive me!" he implored.
- "It was a cruel trick to play," she said irrelevantly.
  - "Forgive me! Let me be your friend!"
- "It was a cruel thing to do," she returned exactly as before.
- "The whole village shall unite to do you honour," he cried to rouse her. "Tom shall creep to your feet again. Miss White shall humbly sue for your pardon and your friendship. As for me, I am your slave for life—do with me as you think fit, only don't, don't cast me from you!"

She seemed incapable of any other expression but her sense of cruelty in the successful experiment.



"It was a cruel thing," she began again, "to—to——" She suddenly stopped and lurched forward, and he caught her in his arms. So the maid found him, when she answered his hurried ring, standing helpless and terror-stricken by the mantel-piece, with his insensible dreamwoman in his arms.

#### CHAPTER XVI

#### HESSIE'S RETURN

"Hath not custom made these things more dear Than those of painted pomp?"

IT was a nice predicament to find herself in-very Here she was at the station of a strange little town, where she had to book again in order to get on to Grassville, and no money to do it with. Her purse was certainly empty. She opened it again to assure herself of this fact. Yes, empty, hopelessly empty! As soon as she had mastered her dismay, and had set herself to face the situation, her mind began to taunt her mercilessly over her ill-advised precipitancy in certain matters. she not, in her hot haste to resume old habits, dressed herself with rigid simplicity, she might have had some valuable about her on which. at a jeweller's, she could have raised sufficient money to take her on to Grassville; and, again. if she had waited until the morrow to dismiss Mrs Chartress from her post as caretaker of the Honey-

. suckle Cottage, someone would have been on the spot of whom she would not have minded to ask a temporary loan for the settlement of cab hire. She had only a handbag with her, the rest of her luggage having been left in Richard Attwood's care to be sent to her on the morrow. in order that she might not have the trouble of it. But, in this sleepy little town, could she have met with a suitable conveyance to take her ten miles into the country? She glanced out of the station at the two seedy-looking cabs, drawn by two still more seedy-looking steeds. Possibly, but evidently not probably. Anyway, there was no use now in considering the question. Fortunately, she had not yet approached the booking-office, but had made her discovery, in seeking a suitable coin to have ready, before approaching the little window in her turn. So, happily, no commotion has been made; she was very thankful for this, not feeling inclined or able to cope with any fuss. She quietly left the station, and wandered timidly away to think the situation out. She wandered as far as the village green, and sat weakly down on one of the rough benches on its borders.

The young man who had travelled down with her from London must have been the thief. The cowardly wretch! He ought to be punished, but she couldn't bother with digressions—she only wanted to get home as quickly as possible. Let him

go with his ill-gotten gains-not much after all! And he had seemed such a nice youth, that young thief, although she remembered to have noticed a wild, desperate look in his restless eyes. He was altogether restless and anxious-looking. They had had the third-class compartment to themselves: and, after one or two casual remarks occasioned by some incidents on the journey, had entered into a conversation with each other. But Hessie was weak and very, very tired after all the strain and exertion entailed by her return to old ways; so, after a time, she had lapsed into a doze, with her neat purse clasped in the hand lying on her lap. Before giving away entirely to her increasing drowsiness, she had smilingly hoped to her companion that she would not sleep past her He had thereupon inquired which her station was, and she had told him Valeland, the place where she was now stranded. He had then informed her that his station was the preceding one, and, at her request, had promised to rouse her were she sleeping when he left the carriage.

What actually happened was this. Hessie's slumber grew deeper and deeper; her hand relaxed its hold of the purse, and a sudden laxity of her whole body gave the purse a slight impetus, which caused it to slide softly to the floor. The youth picked it up, and looked at her. The circumstance



had not roused her; she slumbered heavily on. They were nearing his station, slowing up for it. He was a dissipated, unprincipled boy, then fleeing cur-like from some youthful transgression. He wanted money badly, and the opportunity was unusually good, the temptation strong—much too strong for him. He rapidly opened the purse, extracted its contents, and put them into his wellnigh empty pocket. Closing the purse, he replaced it gently on Hessie's lap, with her ticket still peeping from its outside pocket. He was prepared, had Hessie wakened during his manœuvres, to treat his actions as a joke. The train stopped, and with one fleeting glance at Hessie's dreaming face, the youth quietly opened the door and stepped lightly on the platform, leaving the door open behind him. He swiftly disappeared. a porter, closing the door with the professional bang as the train was gliding out of the station, that first awakened Hessie. She missed her companion instantly, but concluded he had just left her, having proved too shy to keep his promise of first rousing her. The sight of the name of the station, which she kept a lookout for as they glided through it, confirmed her in her conclusions. Knowing her station to be the next, she busied herself in getting her belongings together and making herself neat; and, finally, thankfully alighted at Valeland, tightly clasping her already

lightened purse—only discovering her loss as already stated.

Well, what was she to do? She opened her small handbag, and looked over its contents. No, there was nothing there on which she could raise the necessary money. She closed it, and glanced over her person. No, nothing at all about her, except—except—

Her hand went to her bosom, and she drew out the small, flat case containing her greatest treasure, the treasure she nearly always carried about her, to remind her that it—the concentrated wonders of the past five years—was not all a beautiful illusion—the Queen's bracelet.

Could she relinquish it for a little while, in order to travel home by rail? What a magnificent security for a small loan! But no! At first, it seemed impossible that she could bring herself to use it so: it was too priceless, too sacred to be risked out of her possession. She put it into her bag. Then, as she rose and took a few steps on her way back to the town, the full realisation of her general feebleness, in reference to that rough ten-mile walk, made her waver. The September sunshine was beginning to fade, too, and gloomy clouds to gather. A cold, dreary little breeze sprang up. She stopped an old labourer who was passing her, and inquired of him the most direct way of walking to Grassville. He gave her the



desired information with full details, and then paternally proceeded:

"Eh, lass, but ye'll never do it! It's a good ten mile, and maybe more, and ye look none too hardy. It's turnin' wet, too, I'll be bound," with a shrewd look at the sullen sky. "Take th' train, young lady, that's my advice, take th' train!"

Hessie smiled and shook her head, and, thanking him, walked on. She was passing through the town on her way to the highroad to Grassville when it began to rain. She happened to be just before a jeweller's shop, too, and the rain and that circumstance brought her to a sudden decision. She entered the shop.

The proprietor, a staid, sharp-looking man with iron-grey hair, came forward and said with quiet, business-like courtesy:

"Good afternoon. What can I do for you, Miss?"

Hessie responded to his salutation while abstracting the precious case from her bag; she then placed the bag on one of the tall chairs by the counter, and faced the jeweller with the case in her hand.

She was conscious as she did so that her easy self-possession and savoir-faire had deserted her as subtly as they had come to her—with the elegancies of dress and surroundings which she had for ever renounced. She would have liked to have reserved those particular features of the

abandoned greatness, but they proved strangely inalienable from the wearing of rich fabrics and jewels amidst exquisite appointments and courtly company. She met the jeweller's eyes shrinkingly, and replied to his question with an awkward embarrassment in keeping with her countrified aspect.

"I—I have been robbed," she said nervously, humbly, "of—of every penny I had with me; and —and I want to know if you will—will kindly lend me a little money to get on to my home in Grassville, and take this as a security. I know no one here."

She touched the spring of the case, and the brilliant circlet flashed across his vision. The astonished man stared speechless at it and her alternately; at the sickly looking little girl with the frightened manner, dressed in coarse serge, a sailor hat, and clumsy gloves and boots; then at the splendid piece of jewellery, fit for a queen. At length, he took the case from her, and examined the bracelet curiously. Returning it to its white velvet bed, he closed the case with a snap, and pushed it towards her. Hessie coloured and her eyes smarted instinctively as she anxiously watched him.

"I'm sorry," he said brusquely, "but I can't oblige you."

His suspicion that the bracelet was stolen rang out in his tones, and Hessie's intuition was strong

and her perceptions delicate. She grew crimson with indignation, and the tears in her eyes grew hotter. But she lacked the spirit to assert herself, and, replacing the case in her bag, left the shop in proud silence. She felt she could not endure another such humiliating suspicion and rebuff, so she trudged on through the chilling drizzle and gained the highroad. Her bag and umbrella seemed to grow heavier and heavier, her limbs stiffer and stiffer, her head lighter and lighter as the miles were gained; but she set her teeth resolutely and trudged onwards.

The rain increased; the road grew muddy and full of puddles. Her feet felt damp through her thick boots, and her short serge skirt grew heavy with the rain it absorbed. Dared she rest awhile? No, not yet, not yet! There was still too much to be accomplished. So she bit her lip and pressed forward.

When she felt that she had probably walked more than half way, she sat down by the roadside, and let her bag and umbrella fall on each side of her. The rain beat on her head, face, and shoulders, but she didn't mind it; the old flat stone on which she had seated herself was dripping, but that was nothing; the luxury of resting after that relentless five mile tramp was, for the time being, all-sufficing. Presently, she became aware of a sensation of hunger. Her faithful maid had, on parting

with her, placed a small, neat packet in her bag, with the remark: "You may need this, Miss." Hessie had, at the time, thanked the thoughtful girl almost unheedingly; but she remembered the packet gratefully now. Food, no doubt. She feverishly opened the bag and drew the parcel out. Impatiently snapping the string and unfolding the paper, she came upon its contents—dainty sandwiches and a little flask of good old wine. She seized one of the sandwiches; but, somehow, the sensation of hunger deserted her at the first mouthful, which she had difficulty in swallowing, and was succeeded by a sensation of disgust. She tossed the sandwiches away.

"A greedy fancy of mine!" she murmured. "I am not hungry at all. I am thirsty—thirsty—thirsty! I want a long, long drink of cool clear water!" She glanced at the wine in distaste, but put the flask back into her bag.

"Oh for a drink of God's crystal beverage!"

She looked despairingly about her. The puddles were not inviting. She took off her hat and held it out to the steady rain. But the result was not successful, the crown of the cheap straw becoming saturated and letting the water through before sufficient was collected for her purpose. She gave up the attempt, and, shaking the hat, put it on again. She now began to shiver violently. The afternoon was passing away; she must get on.

She hung the bag on her arm, and staggered to her feet. The umbrella she decided to abandon; she couldn't well be any wetter, and it would be something less to carry. She walked on giddily.

The rain ceased as she did so, and a last feeble ray of the waning sun shone upon her. for the change, she urged herself along-on, on, on, with leaden feet and burning eyes, straining out for some familiar landmark. Dusk had gathered before the friendly Hall dawned upon her aching vision. Two or three vehicles of different descriptions had rattled past her during her weary walk, but it was only now, when she was practically at home, that an overtaking cart slowed up beside her and the driver asked her, in the local dialect, whether she would like a lift? The irony of it almost made her laugh, but she was afraid she might burst into tears as well. She felt exactly as Tom had done when he was writhing under the renewed sting of her complete desertion of him and her pathetic rendering of "One little hut among de bushes" came back so clearly to him. She refused the friendly carter's offer with thanks.

What a blessing, she thought, as she plodded on, that that dear haven of refuge, the Honeysuckle Cottage, stood on the very outskirts of the village! There would be no curious doors or windows or

street loungers to be passed to gain the goal now. Yes, so much had she won by walking—nothing to pass but the grand old wood-shrouded Hall. was alongside its Park now. Ah, just to keep her senses until the cottage was gained! she praved. She prayed it fervently, for there was an odd, deaf booming in her ears, though, contradictory as it may seem, her hearing was at the same time painfully acute; her head felt feathery, her sight was blurred, and her steps uncertain. Were her senses really leaving her at this critical moment? She paused, and listened intently. No, she was not deaf: she heard, with relief, the distant barking of a dog, an approaching dog, for the bark grew She even heard the dog's clearer and clearer. master, yet more distant, trying to whistle him back. But the dog came on, as her ears informed She strained her eyes and saw it—a speck, a growing speck in the distance. It loomed nearer and nearer—a large, brown dog. Taking a step forward, still studying the dog stupidly, she stumbled and fell. The great brute threw itself upon her with a howl. She closed her eyes and Then she felt it feverishly screamed faintly. licking her face, hair and hat, her hands, dress and bag-everything of hers its huge slobbering tongue could find, and always with a running accompaniment of delighted whines. She opened her eyes and looked up at it.

"Guar—" she began. Then her head fell back and her eyes closed.

Guardian sent up another long howl for assistance, and his master's never-ceasing whistle sounded nearer. It did not, however, approach quickly enough for Guardian, who snatched up Hessie's hat from where it had fallen, and started off to meet him. Guardian laid the hat at Tom's feet, and tore back, barking. Tom picked up the hat and ran swiftly after him. Together, they bent over the unconscious girl.

Had anything prepared Tom for the sight? He hardly knew. Certainly Guardian's exceptional excitement and the girl's hat had fluttered his pulses; but then it might only be some stranger, he thought, as he ran, whose distress the sagacious, compassionate brute wished to bring home to him. Ah, far more likely! The picture of the little satin-gowned, jewel-decked figure, bowing to a powerful sea of enthusiastic friends flashed before him, and he looked at the poor little hat and laughed. Ridiculous! Yet there was, oddly enough, no sensation of surprise when he beheld her: he couldn't think at all, he could only act.

He laid her as flat as possible, with her head resting on the lowest spot. He unfastened her dress at the neck, exposing her throat fully, and fanned her briskly with the hat. In a moment or

two she sighed heavily, and opened her eyes. He smiled at her reassuringly.

"Tom!" she gasped. "Dear Tom!"

"All right, Hessie!" he said gently. "You'll be all right now. Be brave!"

He dropped the hat, and opened the bag beside her in search of something to assist to revive her. He caught up the flask with delight, and wrenching off the metal cup at the bottom, filled it with the rich port. Passing his left arm under her head and raising it slightly, he fed her with the wine, sip by sip, until the cup was empty. He half filled it again, and again gently forced her to empty it. Then he put the flask back into the bag, shut it, and gave it to Guardian to carry; and taking Hessie in his arms, they proceeded to the Honey-suckle Cottage.

In the porch Tom whispered:

"Is the woman still here, Hessie?"

"No," she breathed. "I sent her away yesterday. Here's the key." She produced it from her coat pocket.

Tom opened the door without setting her down, laid her on the sofa in the little parlour, and lit the lamp. How dear, and plain, and tiny it all looked! she thought, gazing about her, with her arm round Guardian's neck and her lips to his silky ear, as he sat bolt upright at her side. How unchanged! Things were only a little faded, that was all.

"Is there anything in the house, Hessie?" Tom now softly asked, through the music of Guardian's happy tail—thump, thump, thump upon the floor.

"Mrs Chartress had orders to put in a supply of everything before leaving," she whispered back.

Tom went immediately into the kitchen, and in a few minutes a fire was burning brightly there. Then he returned to the parlour, lifted the basketsofa with Hessie on it as if it were the merest trifle, and put it down before the cheery kitchen hearth, Guardian following and taking up his station as before.

"How strong and beautiful you are, Tom!" she said dreamily.

He made no reply, but hurried upstairs, returning with some blankets: these he spread out over the fender for the now genial blaze to warm. Then he rapidly divested Hessie of her sodden boots, and ordered her and helped her to get out of her damp dress and stockings. He proceeded to wrap her in the warm blankets, and then hung her wet things out to dry.

"When did you last eat, Hessie?" he inquired, while thus engaged.

"This morning . . . . I'm not hungry," she murmured.

He filled a little saucepan with water, and set it on the fire; investigating the larder, he confiscated an egg and some bread, some salt and pepper.

Boiling the egg, he broke it into a cup with some bread-crumbs, and seasoned the mixture judiciously with the salt and pepper. He insisted on feeding Hessie with this, and on her following this feat up with another half measure of the wine. Putting everything neatly away again and replenishing the fire, he finally drew up a chair to the side of the sofa near its foot, and studied her anxiously. When she stretched down her little wasted hand to him, he took it and patted it encouragingly.

"Better?" he smiled.

"Oh, so much better, Tom!" she sighed thankfully. "The nasty, hollow, faint feeling is gone, the deadly chilliness, too; I feel quite comfortable and cosy."

"That's right, that's right."

"How good — how good you are, dear Tom. You won't leave me, will you? I should have died there in the road, I am sure, if you had not come."

"No, I am not going to leave you," he said; "not yet, at any rate."

"You haven't asked me how I came here, Tom!" she said after a pause.

"No, but I should like to know. Would you like to tell me now? Do you feel able?"

"Yes, yes!"

So, with slow, painful earnestness, she told him the thrilling story of her long, fierce struggle with

her heart and conscience in the very height of her splendour, and of the final and complete victory of auld lang syne; of her confessing to Richard Attwood, with grateful penitence, that she could not go on but must go back, and of the marvellous confession he had made to her in return; of her return journey with its startling adventure; and, last but not least, of her all-pervading satisfaction in being once more in the little home of her forefathers, amongst her own simple class.

Tom listened, transfixed—startled, interested, convinced into immobility.

"I have now told you the whole sacred truth," she panted solemnly, "as God is above me, and as I hope for salvation! Oh, Tom, say something!"

"He must be mad," he said.

"I don't know. Morbid — eccentric. He is strangely earnest over it."

"It was a cruel thing to do," he went on, with an effort.

"So I said."

"A dastardly trick—one he should be made to pay for . . . . but never mind that now."

"No, never mind that now," she repeated, looking at him yearningly.

He answered the look.

"So I wronged you, Hessie," he said, trying to struggle out of his confusion of ideas, "and—so far—him!"

"Yes," she returned proudly. "You wronged us both—deeply."

"God forgive me!" he said simply. "God forgive me! Can you, Hessie?"

She stretched out her arms to him.

He drew nearer to her, flushed and trembling.

"Do—do you still love me, Hessie?" he gasped.

"Ah, a million, million times better than before I learnt what I have learnt and saw what I have seen! And you?"

He fell on his knees, and gathered her to his heart.

"My own little girl!" he murmured, covering her face with kisses. "My own brave, true, pure little sweetheart!"

Then he paused in sudden awe.

"But you are so great and grand now, Hessie!" he cried.

"No more," she said, laughing and crying happily.

"No more. My big world doesn't even know where I've disappeared to, and never will, I hope. My little world is all I care for, with my future in it—as your wife!"

"God bless you, dear!" he said, with emotion.

"There, there, Tom!" she exhaustedly returned, "I'm perfectly happy now; I want to enjoy it all—in silence."

So he humoured her, drawing his chair closer, and dreaming with her into the glowing fire,

always with her hand in his. Presently, she slumbered; and then he rose to cover her the better, and took a noiseless turn or two about the room to stretch his cramped limbs. He meanwhile thought the position out. The night was creeping on: he must leave her; who should he send to fill his place? Let her decide.

She slept soundly for half an hour, and he hadn't the heart to disturb her; then she wakened, much refreshed, but complaining of thirst. He made her a cup of tea, and persuaded her to eat a little thin bread and butter with it.

"Hess, dear," he said, as he took the cup from her, "I must leave, you know; it won't do to stay any longer. Who shall I send to you?"

At first, she was surprised and hurt; the next instant, she understood. Yes, the world was much too blunt and coarse a place to dream of, far less to appreciate his womanly care of her; and it was, for all its degrading denseness, to be conciliated.

- "I forgot about the passing time," she said apologetically. "Are you tired, dear Tom? Have I been detaining you inconveniently?"
- "No, dear. You know it's not that. Filos, perhaps, is wondering about me."
- "Ah! I forgot to ask for him. How is he, and where is he?"
  - "He's not well, dear. But he's at home in a

warm basket, with food and drink within reach, so he's all right. He's been droopy for some days now, but I hope to pull him round."

- " Dear Tom!"
- "Who shall I send to you, Hess?" She smiled back at him.
- "I was awfully jealous of her once," she confessed, almost gaily, "but that's past now. Send—if she will come—Kate Lawless."

He laughed, and took a lover's farewell, leaving her carolling faintly, sweetly:

"One little hut among de bushes, One dat I love."

He took up the refrain himself as he sped upon his mission—took it up tenderly. The song had lost its sting for Tom.

#### CHAPTER XVII

#### THE DEATH OF THE DREAM-WOMAN

"Thou art tired; best be still."

THE fourteen days of Hessie's illness was a fierce, never-to-be-forgotten ordeal to all her friends, the three figures who stood out most prominently in her brief dramatic life-Miss White, Tom and Richard Attwood — suffering, most of course. under the anxious strain and stunning loss those fourteen days entailed. Kate Lawless and one of Tom's cousins took entire charge of the invalid, and, under Dr Gussing's superintendence, proved so thoroughly capable, that Tom and Miss White contentedly left everything in their hands, and tried to divest their troubled minds by a steady application to their respective duties. They made it a rule, however, to visit the sick-room three times a day-morning, noon, and night; and, did they not happen to meet Dr Gussing when he was paying his last visit to the Honeysuckle Cottage for the

day, they invariably supplemented their good-night to Hessie by calling at the Doctor's house for his report. From this, it may be inferred that Miss White had again taken Hessie to her heart with a tender remorse which threatened to rival Tom's. And so Hessie lay in her old room, awfully weak but in no very great pain, and placidly enjoyed the quiet, familiar security of her cherished little home and the unwearying care of the people she loved best on earth—more peacefully happy, as she told them, than she had ever been before.

"I don't think I want to get better," she said once to Miss White. "All this is so untroubled and sweet, and active life is so perplexing. I am very, very tired: I should like to dream out of existence—like this."

And was promptly chided by Miss White as a sinful, selfish little thing, and reminded of her future as Tom's wife.

"Yes," she said dreamily, looking at her clasped hands before her. "But Kate would be more suitable for him, wouldn't she? Stronger, simpler, more steady."

"Only he doesn't happen to be in love with her," returned Miss White, sharply. "And he is with you, and you with him—eh, my Hessie, for all your philosophy?"

"Yes, I love him—I love you all—dearly," she said, with a curious far-away calmness.

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"And, besides," Miss White went on, "you'll have to resign yourself to getting better, dear, going on as we are."

"Yes," she said, "I am better—but, oh, so tired! And my throat and cough bother me, and that pain in my side."

"Patience, dear. We'll conquer all that in time."

At first, Dr Gussing was decidedly optimistic on the subject of his interesting patient; then, as the days passed away without bringing any definite improvement, he grew vague. Finally, he acknowledged to Miss White and Tom that he did not like the character of the respiration and cough and the increasing weakness, and a consultation was decided on with a specialist at Lynton.

Richard Attwood was, of course, again upon the scene. Before appearing, however, he wrote Miss White and Tom a full confession of his life and its aim, and of his inexpressible joy in Hessie's return to them. Entreating their pardon for all he had made them suffer, he implored them to allow him to resume his old friendly intercourse, and, above all, to permit him to join them in making much of their little heroine.

Miss White's reply was one of wholesale, unforgiving condemnation; while Tom's merely intimated that he would give his answer when the issue of Hessie's illness was over; and both

strongly recommended Richard Attwood to keep away. He appeared, nevertheless, harassed and conciliatory. Tom and Miss White systematically ignored and avoided him; and when cornered, merely answered his anxious inquiries in cold, curt monosyllables. The nurses, Kate and Anne, proved not more amenable. The villagers were sullen. Even Dr Gussing was unfriendly. The hero's day in Grassville was over.

When Hessie's condition, by what he could glean, became grave, Richard Attwood waylaid Dr Gussing and urged a consultation upon him, only to be informed icily that one had already taken place. What was the result of that consultation? Well, they thought time alone would show.

With this meagre information the poor dreamer was forced to be content, and with inundating the Honeysuckle Cottage with flowers, fruit, and notes, none of which reached the little winged siren. He altered, the poor dreamer, during this time of tribulation, almost beyond description. The line or two of silver in his hair, which had called forth Tom's sympathy and forbearance at their first encounter—it seemed to all a century ago—was a thing of the past; there was only a line or two of brown now; the old handsome, careworn face was now shockingly sunken and haggard, and the old trim, neat appearance un-

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cared for. The man's whole aspect was frayed and broken. But no one but Collins knew or cared that the man hardly ate or slept, and that the hours when he was not upon the scene of his trial were spent in exhausting, demoralising brooding. Collins alone knew and cared, but was helpless to avert the evil he saw breeding during those fateful days.

Hessie began to realise her condition more and more, and insisted on making her will. all laughed at her, of course; but a simple little document was drawn up by Dr Gussing to pacify her, and witnessed by Kate and Anne. In it, she left the Honeysuckle Cottage and whatever money she died possessed of to Tom; the Queen's bracelet to her first and dearest instructress, Miss White; and what remained of her jewels she divided between Mrs Winston and Mrs Grevson. after having first presented Kate and Anne each with a handsome token of her gratitude and esteem-to Kate, her gold watch, chain and charms; to Anne, a pretty brooch and pair of bangles en suite. She had wished, on retiring from the world, to present a memento of herself to Richard Attwood and to Signor Martelli, and, with this end in view, had had two exquisite miniatures of herself done for them, and set in gold. She wanted to send them from the Honeysuckle Cottage, so they were packed away

somewhere in her luggage, all of which had come safely to hand. These she now bequeathed to the intended owners in her will. She, that evening, asked Tom and Miss White for news of Richard Attwood for the first time.

"He's been about from the first, mad to see you," Tom said reluctantly. "But we wouldn't let him, of course. He shan't bother you, dear."

"But I think I should like to see him," she went on slowly, "—now."

"My dear, you are not well enough yet to get up to see him," struck in Miss White.

"No. But he can see me here."

"It wouldn't be proper, Hessie."

She gave her old teacher a sweet, dreamy smile.

- "I don't think that matters-now," she breathed.
- "Oh, Hess, don't be a dismal little girl!"
- "I'm not. But let him in the next time he comes."
  - "All right, dear." It was Tom who spoke.
- "And now, Tom, and you, dear Miss White, I want to say something to you. Tom mustn't be cross with me for saying it, because it is such a relief to get it off my mind."

She sat up to address them the more impressively. "If I should die," she went on, with an effort, for her breathing was laboured, "you mustn't make a trouble of it. You must say to yourselves: 'Well, she dreamed out of existence, as

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she said she would like to, contentedly and happily, in the place and with the people most precious to her heart.' For if it comes to pass, it will be so. You must also say to yourselves: 'I won't be so unkind to her memory as to wish her back, or let her absolute rest prey upon my life and work.' I shall know it, and be glad. You see, I'm afraid, if I live, I might fail and be grieved in a thousand ways, and the prospect daunts me-because I am so weak and tired! I could never go back to my big world, because I love you and this too much; and yet, because my big world held me closely for more than five years, I am weakened and fanciful, and really not fit, I think, to do my part by you. And so it seems best lovingly to say good-bye to each other—quite the best thing in the world to me . . . . if only you will not trouble!"

She sank back exhausted, and when they went to her with tender, encouraging words, they found that she had swooned. After this she grew delirious, and all then knew that it was merely a question of time. Miss White and Tom remained on at the Honeysuckle Cottage. Towards morning Hessie had a lucid interval, and said to Tom, left for the moment in charge:

"I leave—the field—open—to a better girl, Tom! Take her when she comes your way—I shall be glad, so glad! And now—put him in my bed."

"Who, my darling?"

"The friend . . . . who never doubted — never wavered . . . . all the time."

Intuitively, Tom understood her. Guardian was nearly always in the room. Tom hoisted the huge animal on to the bed, and the mastiff crouched down affectionately at his mistress's side.

"Thank you, Tom," she whispered, with a kiss.

"No paint now to poison you. As for the other, let him alone—it is not worth while! Tell him for me not to seek her any more—it is not worth while! Don't grieve either, dear Tom—it is not worth——"

She left the sentence unfinished, and, putting a wasted arm round Guardian's neck, wearily hid her face against his.

The minutes flew by. The stillness of the room remained unbroken — became oppressive. Tom grew suddenly panic-stricken; he did not know why. He rose and touched Hessie timidly, then called the others affrightedly.

"What is it?" they cried together.

"I don't know," Tom panted. "Hessie seems very still, and her arm feels cold. She has fainted. Bring her round."

But Guardian growled fiercely at them on their hurried approach.

"Get the dog away, Tom," Miss White said quickly.

### The Death of the Dream-Woman

It was done, but it took time and tact. Miss White then turned Hessie's face up, and bent over her. Tom stood on the opposite side of the little bed, and watched her closely. When Miss White, with a gasping pause, drew the sheet up high, he swiftly stayed her hand.

"No, no!" he said, "she's only fainted."

Miss White could not speak to him, but she gently put his hand aside, and completely covered the peaceful little face. Then the three stole out and left him mercifully with his dead.

Tom stood rigid for some moments where they had left him; then a shuddering sob ran through his frame. He stole round to the other side of the bed to look at her again, and a few scalding tears fell upon the fixedly solemn little face. Tom wiped them away tenderly, and covered her up again.

"She said I mustn't grieve," he murmured, turning away with bowed head. "She was ready to go, poor little soul, and nothing can harm her now. But—it feels strange—so strange!—without her. Maybe you're with mother, Hessie, making it right with her. I—I hope so."

The sound of voices downstairs braced him up suddenly; he recognised the voice of Richard Attwood. He took a few breathless strides forward, but abruptly paused on the threshold of the door.

"You said I was to leave him alone, Hess," he hurriedly whispered, looking towards her as if she were alive. "But you also said he was to be let in the next time he came," he swiftly added. "He shall see you!"

He left the room with a bound, and seizing on the astonished, worn-out man, dragged him easily upstairs.

"She said you were to be shown in here the next time you came," he panted. "Come in, come in—and look at her!"

He hauled the shrinking man into the little bedroom, and, releasing him at the foot of the little bed, stepped forward and drew the sheet from Hessie's face.

"There's your dream-woman," he cried. "Much good she can do you . . . . me . . . . or any one else!"

"She—she died, you see," faltered his unhappy captive. "I never thought of that. She—she oughtn't to have—died!"

"Do you know what you are?" Tom unrelentlessly proceeded. "I don't think so... you don't look as if you had much understanding about you ... you're a murderer—a cowardly, inhuman murderer!"

But Richard Attwood could speak no more; he could only cling to the foot of the little bed and stare at Hessie's small waxen face and lifeless

# The Death of the Dream-Woman

But he saw her otherwise as well. He saw her in the porch of the Honeysuckle Cottage in the blue gingham dress and old white straw hat, glowing in beauty, health, and in simple, innocent happiness; he saw her in the mellow, becoming light of that summer's evening when she had listened to his opening of the campaign, half fascinated and half appalled; he saw her in the parlour of the Honeysuckle Cottage, when she had indignantly repudiated him and told him that she had made a bonfire of those enthralling books of his and laid Signor Martelli's card on the top and 'watched it burn and burn until there was nothing left but a heap of harmless ashes;' he saw her as she had been when on her own surrender, he had come to take her from her Honeysuckle Throne, a white, desperate, silent little figure, standing on her own threshold; he saw her in the numerous kaleidoscopic settings of her brief and brilliant public career; and he saw her a pale, attenuated little girl in a short, untrimmed serge frock and plainly dressed hair, sitting on the floor of the lovely drawing-room of the Palace Mansions, and showing him, with pain and tears, that he had not dreamed in vain!

"Go!" Tom suddenly commanded. "Out of this room, out of my sight! I'll deal with you—later!"

The poor, stunned creature threw up his arms,

and stumbled out of the room and house and away.

Collins found him sitting by the roadside late that evening, some seven miles from his home. The man, suspecting he knew not what, had come out to seek his long absent master in the dogcart.

"Come, sir, come!" Collins cried alarmedly, as he jumped out and went up to the lonely, absorbed figure. "You must be worn out and faint with hunger. Here's Tilden and the cart ready, and anxious to take you home."

"She's dead, Collins," his master said vacantly. "She was to have done so much good to us all, but she died, you see. I never thought of that. She oughtn't to have died."

"Oh, it's what we've all to come to, sir!" Collins returned, concealing his dismay. "So she's gone, poor little soul, is she? Well, all's well with her now, sir."

"She oughtn't to have died," he repeated, as Collins assisted him into the dogcart. "She should have lived to cheer and help us. She oughtn't to have died."

Collins got up beside him, and took up the reins.

"Never mind, sir," he said, starting Tilden off. "It can't be helped."

"He called me a murderer, Collins—a cowardly, inhuman murderer!"

### The Death of the Dream-Woman

- "Who, sir?"
- "Tom Mason. And I don't know I don't know—but that he's right."
  - "Nonsense, sir!"
- "But she came back to him, Collins!" he cried, with trembling eagerness and clutching the man's arm. "From palaces, and silks and jewels, and crowding, cringing courtiers of every rank and wealth, she came back to him. I always knew she would. I knew, when I first saw her, that no gold, no fame, no homage could hold her from him long!"

They reached their destination at length, but no persuasions could tempt the wretched man to eat or rest.

"She's dead," was all Collins could get from him, as he feverishly paced his rooms. "She's dead, she's dead—and nothing matters now!"

#### CHAPTER XVIII

#### **APPREHENSION**

"I will indulge my sorrow, and give way
To all the pangs and fury of despair."

HESSIE was laid tenderly and prettily away, and a new anxiety was born. Tom would not resume his work and the old even tenour of his way. Time crept on, and yet he remained at the desolate Honeysuckle Cottage, idle and moody. the exhortations of his relatives and friends he turned a deaf ear and a sullen mien. The former brought him food and gave the cottage a little supervision, as well as keeping an eye on his own deserted home; and he accepted all their attentions apathetically. The 'prentice at the forge took in the jobs brought there, and, according to his instructions, did his best with them. When the result showed the absence of the master-hand, he took the ratings of his master's patrons meekly; for the youth loved Tom, and he was, too, humbly anxious to learn the trade. Miss White was

# Apprehension

unable to see much of Tom, but she went to him as often and stayed with him as long as her duties permitted, and did her very best to influence him out of his ominous moroseness. But he was as lethargic with her as with the others. At last she lost her temper with him.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tom!" she cried to him sharply one evening. "You are not the first man whose heart has been seared, and you won't be the last. Is this all you are going to do with your strong young body? Get to work, get to work—like a man!"

"I feel stunned," he sulkily returned. "I'm just waiting until the numb feeling wears off a bit, and then I'll set to work—to find him."

"A poor thing to do."

"Maybe. But I can do nothing better first. I must ease my mind to him."

"And why the term 'find him'?" Miss White proceeded. "Is he not at hand—at Denton?"

"No. I walked over there the other morning to see him, and they told me at the Hall that he had gone away with Collins."

"Oh, leave him alone, Tom! We have had enough misery through him—spare us any more! Let him be; it is not worth while."

<sup>&</sup>quot;So she said."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Who?"

<sup>&</sup>quot; Hess."

"And aren't you going to obey her, Tom? The counsel of the dying is wonderfully far-seeing and wise, and should be held sacred. Aren't you going to obey her?"

"No, I'm not. I'm going to have it out with him at every cost. I can do nothing until I do."

"Meanwhile, you are wasting your time and energy most shockingly. Go back to the forge while you're waiting."

"I can't—and I shan't wait much longer either."

"Oh, if you would only go back to the forge, Tom, and manfully take up your work again, you would not only banish that paralysing numbness, but you would work away these morbid, unworthy feelings as well."

"I can't, I can't!" he impatiently reiterated.

Miss White sighed, and reflected deeply for some moments.

"Tom!" she said at length, "I know exactly how you feel, and all my sympathy is yours. But when I was in your place, with a crushed heart and a despairing mind, I resolved that I would still do something good with my young, hardy life. So I struggled with myself; I gathered up all my forces; I put myself in form. It was not easy, Tom; I don't think anything ever came, or could come, harder—but I did it! I came here, and got to work; and so saved and made use of

# **Apprehension**

the life and reason God had given me. I've done good work, haven't I? and grown into a healthy, affectionately esteemed old woman? Ah, Tom, when you are old, there's more consolation in that thought than you can now dream of! It robs the past of all its sting. When I think that it might have been otherwise—that I might have lain down under my burden and withered into a useless, feeble old age, contemptible alike to myself and others, I feel proud of myself—justly, boldly proud; and it is, believe me, Tom, the most delicious feeling in the world!"

She had roused him at last; his eyes were turned on her with interest and curiosity, and he was listening attentively. Was he going to hear the reason of Miss White's advent and seclusion in their little village? That story about which the villagers had speculated for nearly thirty years, and had, all that time, received no hint of from the stately, reserved, yet friendly and gracious woman who had so endeared herself to them? It looked like it. Tom waited breathlessly. It seemed to him a long time before she said nervously:

"Would you like to hear my story, Tom?" Yet she had only paused to control the natural qualms at opening out the painful, long-buried past.

"Yes," he said swiftly. "I should—we've so

often wondered. But only if you don't mind telling me, of course, Miss White."

"I do mind—I am afraid, Tom," she said, with a shadowy smile. "But I hope my story will help you, so you shall hear it."

"Thank you," he gratefully returned. "I'm very proud of your confidence, Miss White, and I'll try to be more deserving of your kindness."

"That's right, Tom! I'm glad to hear you say that."

A silence of some moments ensued, while Miss White mentally arranged the telling of her story, and Tom watched her eagerly.

"An old woman may speak of her youth without vanity or boasting, you know, Tom," Miss White began, a delicate flush suffusing her naturally pale cheeks; "so I will begin my story by a frank statement of the truth. Nearly thirty years ago — thirty years make a tremendous difference, Tom !-I was a beautiful, talented girl in the first enjoyment of social life in London. I entered society with every advantage-good birth and breeding, many accomplishments, an engaging manner, and a face and figure which women criticised and men raved over. There, you can't picture me, I am sure, Tom, out of the wreck before you; and I have no portrait of myself to give you any idea; so you must take my account of myself on trust. It was so."

## **Apprehension**

"Nothing's gone that I can see," he said bashfully, "except, perhaps, youth. I can fancy what you were very well, Miss White."

"What a courtier you are, Tom! I see that I shall pass through your hands with unruffled plumage-old, faded, and weary peacock that I am! Well, to resume. I was, by many years, the baby of our family, Tom, and all my sisters and brothers had married and scattered when entered on those gay scenes of triumphs and heart-burnings. My eldest sister alone remained in England. She had married brilliantly; and, on my parents' deaths, I was left to her charge. Well, I was feted and run after, and many an admirable settlement in life was offered me-in My sister grew annoyed with me for throwing such opportunities away, and accused me of capriciousness and over-confidence. haps she was right; at any rate, these sieges left my heart untouched, and I was not sufficiently anxious about my future not to let that fact weigh with me. At last the man appeared who made me oblivious of everything but my blind adoration of him, and I know that he returned my passionate love and admiration with equal fervour and recklessness. He was good to look at, better still to listen to, and he was my equal in birth, education, and in pecuniary advantages. Nevertheless, my sister disliked and distrusted

him, and a coolness arose between us in consequence. By-and-by she began to repeat warningly to me certain covert whispers against my hero's honour and trustworthiness, and my youthful egotism laughed them all to scorn. At length, when matters came to a crisis, a battle royal took place between us; and in the end, being of age, I carried the day, and won my sister over to a tolerance of an engagement which she was powerless to avert. Ah, we were happy, Tom, in the days which immediately followed! I don't think two people could be more thoroughly in love with each other than we were; and each to the other was the very acme of perfection."

"He didn't die, I hope," Tom murmured anxiously, sympathetically, as Miss White came to an abrupt, ill-omened hesitation in her narrative. Tom was taken quite out of himself now; he was even thrilled.

"He died in the worst possible way to me," Miss White slowly answered; "out of my esteem, out of my love. The loss of our dear little Hessie is a frightful blow to you, dear Tom, but you have a tender, reverent memory of her to cling to, to live by, to strive for—I had no such consolation when the man I had staked my happiness on passed out of my life."

"It must have been bitter to bear," he remarked,

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awkwardly trying to express his concern. "Yes, a worse sorrow than mine."

"Well, I must get on with my story, Tom," Miss White continued, with an effort. engagement was duly announced in the papers in the usual way; and, a day or two later, the early post brought me a surprise in the shape of a strange letter from an absolute stranger to me. The letter struck me instantly, and was the first I took up and read—because in quality and in style it stood out as unique amidst my usual correspondence. The paper and envelope were large, and of the cheapest, commonest description, and the address on the top of the page was in a poor and, to me, unknown part of The writing, however, was neat and grammatical, and the whole tone of the letter singularly and simply earnest. It implored me to come and see the writer that afternoon at a certain hour-it called on me by our common womanhood not to fail her. The more I mused over the letter, the more convinced I became that it was genuine, and the more strongly it appealed to me. The London season was then in full swing, and my engagements were many; but I quickly determined to gratify my curiosity and love of adventure by a surreptitious visit to unfashionable Shepherd's Bush. So I said nothing to my sister, lest she might interpose

obstacles; but I made her a sufficient excuse, and secured my freedom for that afternoon. Following out my directions, later, I eventually found myself before a mean-looking lodging-house, and, after knocking, before a portly, harrassed-looking, but civil woman of the unmistakable landlady type. I asked, as I had been bidden, for Mrs Barton, and was shown into a small, stuffy little horse-hair and woollenmat parlour on the ground floor. I don't think any detail of that visit will ever fade from my mind. The landlady, after choosing a chair for me, retired, saying she would let Mrs Barton know. I waited impatiently.

"My impatience made a century of the five minutes which elapsed between the landlady's exit and Mrs Barton's entrance. Mrs Barton proved to be a small, slight, fair-haired girl, with big, wistful blue eyes and a babyish mouth. Her little face was white and sad, and she was prettily, childishly winning. She was neatly but plainly dressed.

"'Miss White?' she queried timidly (I will keep to the name, Tom; my real one is dead to me).

"'Yes,' I said, rising. 'Are you Mrs Barton?'

"'Yes. Thank you so much for coming! It is good of you! Would you mind coming upstairs to my room? We can talk more privately, more comfortably, up there.'



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"'Certainly,' I said.

"She led the way at once, and I followed her. Her room was very poorly furnished, but it was airy and orderly, and her few simple possessions, tastefully distributed about it, gave it a certain amount of grace and refinement. I sat down at her invitation; but she stood by the poor little mantel-piece, nervously clasping and unclasping her tiny, helpless looking hands.

"'Oh, it is good of you to have come!' she repeated, her big eyes moistening and her lips quivering. 'I scarcely dared to hope it, but I felt that I must leave no chance untried. My letter must have surprised you very much.'

"'It did, indeed. I am all anxiety to hear why you wrote to me.'

"'Yes, of course; I—I must explain at once.' She paused, tried to go on, stammered—and finally burst out desperately: 'I'm afraid I shall have to bore you with an account of myself first, in—in order to make things clear to you.'

"'Very well. I shall be glad to hear whatever you have to tell me; tell it in your own way and in your own time. I have nothing to do this afternoon but listen to you.'

"'You are very, very kind.'

"She took a little time; and then began, with forced calmness:

"'I am the eldest daughter, Miss White, of a 289 19

clerk in a country town. We are poor, but very respectable; and I and my sisters have been fairly educated—with a view to our earning our own living, of course. I obtained, through the influence of kind friends, the post of companion to an elderly lady in a not very distant town-a lady of some wealth and social standing; and this lady, who is most genial, admitted me to more intimacy and allowed me more privileges than a dependant usually enjoys. She has a lovely home, and her friends and relatives being numerous, she is hardly ever without people staying in the house. Amongst these, I, by her kind orders, took my place, and shared their amusements. My patroness assured my father that, if my conduct remained satisfactory, my post would be a permanent one; and my friends all congratulated me on my exceptional good fortune. But my apparent good luck really led to disaster. A gentleman came to stay in the house for some time, and he, seeing me constantly, fell in love with me. He was handsome and engaging, and his attachment to me was ardent and seemed sincere. I was first fascinated, then won. The old lady surprised us at our first love scene, and being, like most warm-hearted people, quick-tempered and impulsive as well, she instantly dismissed me as a sly, heartless flirt. learnt from her angry tirade that the gentleman was supposed to be paying attention to the old

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lady's favourite niece, also staying in the house, and that he was a most desirable 'parti'—much too good for a poor little nobody, who ought, considering her position, to have more self-respect than to allow herself to be played with by her superiors. I was most indignant at her charges, and appealed to the man, who had just proposed to me and been accepted, to clear me in her eyes. He instantly announced his intention of marrying me, and we left the house the next day together.'

"You are perhaps wondering, Tom, at my being able to repeat the interview word by word; but it is no wonder, for it is all branded on my heart. I think it was now that, without understanding her, or dreaming of the blow about to fall, I began to be sensible of a little premonitory chill.

"'Well,' proceeded Mrs Barton, with growing embarrassment, 'I thought we would go at once to my house and explain everything, but my fiancé urged that probably more objections would be made there, on the ground of my youth—I was only eighteen—and on the difference in our social standing; and he persuaded me to place the matter beyond anyone's interference by going on to another town with him, where he said he would marry me as soon as possible. If you are surprised at my rushing thus prematurely into marriage, please remember that I was a most romantic,

impressionable girl, and very much in love; the whole thing appealed to me as strongly and engrossed all my faculties as thoroughly as the most thrilling page of the sensational novels I was in the habit of affecting. We resided the required time in the strange parish where we were to be married, and our names were given in at the parish church. I wrote, meanwhile, home, at his suggestion, to tell them I was all right, and married, and I was coming to see them with my husband before long; but I suppressed my address, lest they might intrude on us before the ceremony was accomplished. I was quite trustful and happy, and, believing then as I do now, that, at the time, he fully meant to keep his sworn word to me. When the time arrived for our marriage, he was taken suddenly and seriously ill, and for a month I nursed him faithfully. When he was on his feet again, and we were discussing the arrangements for our marriage once more, he was suddenly summoned by his family to London, as they feared his mother was dying. He went off at once, and I remained on in our rooms. He wrote me frequently, and I had to comfort myself with these letters and try to possess my soul in patience—for his mother's convalescence was slow, and she clung to the society of her favourite child. After a while the tone of his letters changed: they ceased to be homesick and fluently tender, although he con-

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tinued to supply carefully all my needs. I learnt from little hints he let fall that he was going into society with his brothers, and enjoying it, more and more anxious; for the three months during which our published banns held good were drawing to a close. I was apprehensive, too, of-I know not exactly what. At length, the vaguely dreaded blow fell. He wrote to inform me that he had met a transcendent woman . . . . he was a blackguard, but it was no use . . . , he could not marry me . . . . he loved this magnificent creature-beautiful and clever, good, tender and fascinating beyond all words-madly, in defiance of all bonds . . . . she returned his passion . . . . they could not live apart . . . he would never let me want, always look after my welfare, but I must resign myself to the inevitable—and give up all hope of ever becoming his wife! He implored my pardon; but if I could meet this wonderful woman, which he hoped would never happen, I would not wonder at him.' She took a step or two nearer to me, and I felt the blight of her approach in the increasing coldness and dawning rigidity of my body. 'I don't wonder at him!' she said, with a sobbing gasp. 'I only wonder at myself, myself! I meant to be good!.... was intended to be good! . . . . When I read his letter, I thanked God that my mother was dead; and I thought of my stern, upright father

and innocent sisters as beings in quite another sphere! Then I thought of something else; and I told myself I must watch the papers for the announcement of the engagement in order to learn the name of his contemplated bride, and then I would throw myself on the mercy of this marvellous woman. I felt it would be useless and too degrading to cry out to him. So I am here under an assumed name. I had very little money of my own left, and I would not use his to plot against him: that is why you find me in so poor a place. Ah! I am afraid I've nearly killed you: you look so white and still.'

- "I struggled fiercely with my growing coma, and managed to speak to her.
  - "'There must be some mistake,' I muttered.
  - "'Of identity?'
  - "I nodded.
- "She brought me his photograph, a lock of his curly hair—I had one like it!—his letters; and I examined and read everything carefully.
  - "'Do you believe it now?' she asked.
  - "'Yes,' I said dully.
- "'Oh, I must seem most cruel and selfish to hurt you so!' she cried tearfully, casting herself on the floor beside me. 'I hate to hurt you, but I must—I must!'
- "'You are not hurting me,' I stupidly returned. 'It is all too overwhelming for me to feel anything

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-yet. Besides, who could regret such a black-guard?'

"'Do you suppose that I would condescend to ask this sacrifice of you—to spoil your dream—for my own personal ends?' she cried fiercely, clutching my arms. 'No more, I assure you, than I believe that you would have knowingly taken him from me! He is no more my hero now than he is yours! Had I only myself to think of, I would rather work, beg, or starve, than ever see him again! But—but there is someone else to think of . . . . someone quite innocent, and whom, if I can help it, I must not let suffer! Do you understand me now? I don't want his love, I don't want his protection, I don't want his money—I only want his name . . . . for my child! Will you forgive me, and help me get it?' Her head fell into my lap, and she clung to me sobbingly. 'Will you? -can you? Will you try to shield an innocent, threatened child? Not me-before God!-but the child!'

"As' I looked down at her, Tom, and began to realise it all and dimly see what I must do, I felt old enough to be her mother—and I was barely twenty-two!

"'I will break off my engagement,' I said to her automatically, 'and go away, and try never to cross his path again. I will do it at once. Oh, hush!'

"'And you won't betray me to him?'

"'So help me, God, I won't! You really think he will do his duty by you, then?'

"'I am sure of it. In his disappointment, he will turn to me. I am nothing to him beside you, but I am something without you.'

"'I trust it will prove so,' I said dreamily. 'I sincerely wish you well. Good-bye.'

"So I left her, Tom, with her sobbing blessing and her incoherent thanks singing in my brain; and I did what I had promised, without assigning any reason—save that of a woman's caprice! had a modest independence, and I ran away from him and the 'I told you so's' of my sister and friends, and travelled for some months, and thought out my future. I had always been fond of children, the country, and a simple life; and I mapped out my present career. My solicitor got me this post, and he guards the secret of my address from my family and friends; for I naturally shrank, and and still shrink, from any interference from them, my wound was so deep. Through my solicitor I hear occasionally of my relatives and friends' welfare, and they of mine. And that's my story, dear Tom. I might have done worse, mightn't I?"

There were tears on Miss White's cheeks when she had concluded, and an obstinate lump in Tom's throat.

"You couldn't have done better," he returned. "Did—did he marry her, Miss White?"

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"Yes, Tom. And now I must go. It is late."

Tom saw her home, and took a reverent leave of her. Her confidence and example impressed him more and more, and, try how he would, he could not dismiss the subject from his mind. He passed a restless, dissatisfied night. The next day, he went shyly to see how things were going on at the forge; the day after that, he took hold of a piece of work he found the 'prentice struggling with, and finished it for him; and, on the ensuing day, he locked up the Honeysuckle Cottage and went back bravely to the old routine.

#### CHAPTER XIX

#### THE MADMAN

"The wine of life is drawn and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of."

GRADUALLY Tom resumed, as well, his old long evening rambles, when the day's work was over; but he took them resolutely in the opposite direction to the Honeysuckle Cottage and the road to Denton: he had mastered himself so far that he was determined not to run deliberately into temptation. Still he promised nothing more. He only turned his steps towards Lynton now, and wearied himself thoroughly for a night of unthinking repose; and he denied himself all indulgence in his bereavement, save what was afforded by a brief visit to the churchyard to say good-night to Hessie and his mother now lying side by side. Some one must have been secretly watching and studying his habit; for he no sooner made a practice of this than he began to find the sacred mounds with their simple crosses newly decorated for his evening visits. They were

#### The Madman

always prettily dressed with fresh flowers—flowers that looked as if they had but just been laid there. He had no sentiment that way himself, and he knew, except on holidays, that Miss White's time was too actively employed amongst the living for her to be the authoress of this systematically poetic remembrance. He felt touched and curious, and ventured to question his severely practical aunt and cousins on the subject. They had not done it, of course—which he expected to hear; and they did not know who had—whereat he was disappointed.

Designedly coming earlier to the spot one evening, he discovered Kate Lawless kneeling by the graves with basket, flowers, and scissors, busily making them ready for his inspection. He stepped softly up to her.

"This is very kind of you, Kate," he said, with gratified pleasure. "I have often wondered who was so regularly kind. Thank you very much."

She was startled by his unexpected approach, and blushed furiously as she met his eyes.

"Sure, you're earlier than usual, aren't you, Mr Mason?" she stammered in her pretty, faint brogue.

"Yes. And I'm glad of it; for it's allowed me to find out who was being so good to me and mine, and I wanted to thank them."

"I-I loved Mrs Mason and Miss Lane, you

know," the warm-hearted girl faltered. "They—they were both very good to me—bless them!"

- "And you to them, Kate."
- "Sure, I did but little."
- "You did so much that we'll always feel grateful to you, Kate—always!"
- "How are the dogs, Mr Mason?" she asked shyly, changing the subject, as she gave the finishing touches to the grave. "Aren't they with you as usual?"

"Oh yes! And lively enough. They dropped behind for some mischief, I'll be bound. Ah, here they come!"

All dumb creatures seemed to love Kate: Guardian and Filos greeted her with boisterous affection. She fondled them with pleasure; and then rose, saying she must go. Tom picked up her basket and sunbonnet, and handed them to her, with a smile. As she took them from him. with a word of thanks, and hung them over her left arm, the last soft rays of the setting sun fell prettily on the thick, smooth coils of her rich gold hair, and on her fair, flushed face. Some inward feeling, too, lent a sudden, subtle charm to her commonplace, too palely fringed blue eyes and large, good-humoured mouth. She showed Tom her nice white teeth in a pathetically nervous smile as she said, "Good night." He held out his hand.

#### The Madman

"Good night, Kate," he said, with a hearty pressure. "Thank you so much for remembering them."

He watched her neat, lithe figure disappear, and then resumed his walk.

The next day he came to the churchyard at the same time; the fresh flowers were there—but Kate had gone! How shy she was! And how kind-hearted! He came still earlier the following day, and once more found her kneeling by the graves.

"I have caught you again, Kate," he said, in a little triumph, as her face gave him its former startled, confused greeting. "You are earlier than usual to-day, aren't you?"

"I—I thought maybe you'd be coming earlier regularly now," she murmured, drooping her head low, "and I didn't wish to intrude on you again. Sure, you like to be alone here, Mr Mason, and I'm sorry to find myself so often in your way."

"But you're not, Kate!" he earnestly assured her. "I think I came this evening to see you as well as them—I know I did! You're such a tried old friend, you know."

"Ah, you're wanting to make me feel more comfortable about it!" she cried quickly; "but I've finished, and must go now." She rose instantly, catching up basket and sunbonnet.

"You're mistaken, Kate. Stay a moment! Please!"

"Sure, I can't, Mr Mason. I've to bake for Aunt to-night."

She gave the dogs a caress apiece, and Tom a smiling nod, and beat a swift retfeat.

It took some manœuvring to catch her at her good offices again, but Tom managed it in a day or two. He found a certain pleasure in watching and talking to this simple, tender child. She had finished decorating the graves, however, and was about to leave the churchyard, when he entered it. They greeted each other as before.

"It's true, Kate," he said at once, "that I like to meet you here. I've nobody much to talk to now, and I begin to feel sometimes that I'd like to talk of mother and—and Hess to someone who knew and loved them. I'm lonely in the evenings—often."

Kate turned and leaned against the low stone wall which encompassed the churchyard; and she looked at Tom unshrinkingly now, although her eyes were full of tears.

"Maybe you wouldn't care to spend the evenings with some of your friends?" she hazarded.

"No, not yet."

"You'd be the better for it, if you could bring your mind to it," she went on kindly. "And you'd like it, I think, after the first break, Mr Mason."

"Not yet, I think."

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#### The Madman

"It's more than six months now since—since she died," Kate gently reminded him.

"Is it? It seems like yesterday."

"Yes, sure, time melts away wonderfully in brooding: but it's time wasted, don't you think, Mr Mason?"

"Yes, it is. But some people can't help giving way to weakness—I can't in this. I only begin to feel I'd like to have a chat about them now and then with an old friend—such a truly sympathising friend as you've proved, Kate. And yet I think you avoid me. It isn't kind."

There was no gleam of coquetry in her face and manner when she frankly answered him.

"I have tried not to meet you, Mr Mason," she said, looking steadily at him; "and I'm sorry to say I must go on doing it. Sure, it isn't that I don't understand you, or wouldn't like to listen to you—I should very much; but people wouldn't understand my coming here just because I remembered them gratefully and was sorry for you. They wouldn't think of them; and, if they did, they wouldn't believe it. They'd say I came to put myself in your way, and you came, not to talk of them, but to talk to me. 'Twould be wounding to us both; so we'll not give them the chance to hurt us. You'll not try to be here again when I am here, will you, now, Mr Mason?

I'd like to go on with this," and she glanced back at the graves.

She was so entirely free from any embarrassment or arrière-pensée herself, that Tom, startled and confused though he was by her plain speaking, felt that gallantry demanded he should immediately conquer these feelings. So he said with forced calmness and in all sincerity:

"But, since we know ourselves to be 'not guilty,' can't we afford to laugh at them, Kate?"

"I can't," she said simply, and held her hand out in farewell.

"All right, then," returned Tom, taking the cool, capable hand heartily. "Good night. God bless you, Kate."

"Good night, Mr Mason. The same to you."

The empty Honeysuckle Cottage rather preyed upon Tom's mind as time went on: he felt he ought to make some use of it—if not for his sake, for its own; for an unoccupied house soon falls into decay, and his relatives gave it but a hasty, unsystematic supervision now; besides crying out to him relentlessly, from the depths of their practical souls, not to be a fool, but to rent it. He sought Miss White in his dilemma.

"You see," he said, "I shall hate to see anyone in Hessie's place, but I can't let the place rot to pieces—and it's too far from the forge to suit me. Do you know of anyone who

#### The Madman

would like to take it and would treat it tenderly, Miss White?"

Miss White smiled.

- "Great minds run in unison, Tom," she returned.

  "I've been thinking a good deal of the Honey-suckle Cottage lately, and I was going to ask you whether you would rent it—to me?"
  - " To you!" he cried in astonishment.
- "Yes, Tom. I am getting an old woman, you know—a very tired old woman!—and so I am thinking of giving up my labours and retiring on my laurels. I have already entered into communication with another lady with a view to her supplying my place as schoolmistress, and everything is pretty well settled. She must have my little house, of course; and, as I would like to end my days among you, where I have been so peaceful and happy, I want to rent a cottage here. There is no fear of my not treating the Honeysuckle Cottage tenderly, is there, Tom?"
- "No!" he cried delightedly. "It's splendid you're taking it, Miss White! But I hope you're not ill," he added anxiously.
- "Oh, no, dear boy!" She smiled. "Only, I'm not as energetic as I was, and I feel I deserve a rest."
- "I'm sure you do. What can I do to the Honeysuckle Cottage for you, Miss White."
  - "Well, Mr Landlord, we'll go over it to-morrow

afternoon after school and see. Thank you so much, dear Tom, for falling in so readily with my wishes. The spot is almost as dear to me as it is to you, and I shall enjoy passing the rest of my life there."

Tom left her to go for his evening constitutional. entering the churchvard as usual. But one of the graves presented an unusual appearance to-night: the simple arrangements of garden flowers, which he was accustomed to see ornamenting it, were scattered on the ground around, bruised and torn. as if some wild beast had been mauling them in a fury; and on that grave—Hessie's—magnificent hot-house blossoms, artistically displayed, shed their overpowering fragrance and delicate Tom stared for some time, all amazed at bloom. the transformation, and then turning back to seek an explanation of Kate. She could give none. however, and returned with him to the spot, where much speculation ensued. They gave up the mystery, at length, and went their several ways; but, when the next evening presented the same sight to Tom, a suspicion that had sought admission to his mind the previous day, and been dismissed, was accorded room. Could it be possible that he had returned and was claiming supremacy over her even in death? Who else would have acted with such heartless, all-consuming selfishness?

## The Madman

Tom was in no gentle frame of mind that night: everything, as is sometimes the case, had seemed to combine that day to irritate and oppress him: he had risen feeling badly; the 'prentice had proved most exasperatingly stupid over an important piece of work which Tom, in his lethargic indisposition, had weakly allowed the eager, sympathising youth to tackle for him, and the outcome of which was a disagreeable row with one of Tom's best patrons; then his cousin Bessie had, in bringing him his dinner, recklessly commenced to tease him for his partiality for Kate; and he had so roughly checked the thoughtless, high-spirited girl, and reminded her so bitterly of his recent bereavement, that she had retired in tears; thereupon his aunt had brought him his tea, and incidentally avenged Bessie, by telling him that he needn't take on so at the girl's fooling, as Dan Crossbars, the shoemaker's son, was courting Kate 'nicely'-for Dan Crossbars and he were about as friendly as a strange cat and dog, with no conception of the beauty of the command, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'; and Kate-well, Kate had a peculiar place in his esteem . . . . a place which set her far above Dan Crossbars; and now the sight of that mound so purely sacred to him, thus again ruthlessly interfered with, added its potent sting. Tom had to struggle painfully with himself before he could induce his feet to take him Lynton way

—they wanted, desperately wanted, to go in the opposite direction—but he conquered in the end, and started off at a good pace in the hope of walking off some of his superfluous spleen. But the climax of that day's trials was reached, when Tom, on the outskirts of Lynton, saw a familiar figure leaning idly against a tree with a straw in its mouth. Then Tom's self-restraint suddenly took wings: he pounced on the startled man, and shook him as a gale might shake a reed.

"Where is the fiend you call your master?" he cried. "Answer me at once—take me to him at once—or I'll throttle you! Do you hear me, you blackguard?"

"All right, all right!" Collins said sullenly, as soon as Tom would allow him to speak. "I'll take you to him, if you want to see him, although you might have asked me more civilly. Come along!" And he turned towards Lynton, Tom, wondering and suspicious, following him.

"What are you doing here?" Tom at once began. "I thought you were travelling. They told me so at the Hall."

"So we were," Collins sulkily returned. "But it didn't do master the good we hoped, and he was fretful to settle down; so we came home a few days ago. It was thought best that he should leave the Hall, and, as he made it a point of keeping to this neighbourhood, they took this

#### The Madman

cottage for him." Collins indicated one they were approaching — pretty, neat, and retired, with a garden shut in by a six-foot screen of wall and hedge.

"So he's been ill, has he?" Tom said savagely, as he followed the valet through the garden to the front door, which the latter opened with a key which he drew from his pocket.

"Yes," said Collins stoically. "Very ill. Come in." He entered, and held the door back for the unwelcome guest.

Tom paused on the threshold. "You coward!" he cried contemptuously to the impenetrable valet.

"You're mistaken," the latter retorted coolly; "and you're not one either, or I wouldn't let you in. If you disappoint me, I'll soon settle you," he added, with a threatening look. He led Tom to one of the front rooms, and, entering it, bade Tom follow him 'softly.'

Tom did so, with growing awe.

A lamp stood on a table in the centre of the room, and cast a bright glow over everything. The table was littered with slips of paper covered with writing, as was the carpet all about it. At the table sat the emaciated figure of a white-haired man, with a drawn, parchment-like face, save where a streak of hectic lighted the hollow cheeks. He was busy, feverishly busy, writing, writing! and paid no heed to the newcomers. Collins spoke

to him twice without succeeding in engaging his attention; and then the man forcibly, yet gently, staved the busy hand.

"I have something to say to you, sir!" he cried, as if to one deaf.

"Ah, is it you, Collins?" a hollow voice returned, as the dim eyes looked up. "You mustn't interrupt me, my good man; there is so much to be done, you know, and time creeps, creeps, creeps away! All her life to be written that people may know of it, and may profit by it! I write all daydon't I, Collins?—and yet each morning there seems as much as ever to be done!"

"Rest a moment now, sir, and see if you can tell me who this is?"

But his master's weary eyes had wandered back to his manuscript.

"If she had lived, though, Collins," the hollow voice wandered on, "I needn't have written of her. I could have brought people to see her, and to talk to her. What a pride! What a joy! My Dream-Woman, all mine, whom I had proved—I had found! She should have lived—she should have lived!"

"See if you can tell me who this is, sir!"

"But she died, Collins! I never thought of that! She oughtn't to have died! She oughtn't to have died!"

"Who is this, sir?" Collins reached back his left hand and pulled Tom forward-Tom, from



#### The Madman

whom the power of will and motion seemed suddenly struck away.

But still Richard Attwood did not look up.

"Her example shall not be lost, however, Collins!" the poor creature cried, pursuing the one theme his disordered brain was now capable of grasping. "I'll write her life! . . . . I'll write it all! . . . . before I die! To work, to work! There's lots to be done! Leave me, Collins!"

"Speak to Tom Mason first, sir!"

"Tom Mason!" He looked up at Collins again.
"He called me a murderer—a cowardly, inhuman murderer!... and I don't know—I don't know,
Collins, but what he's right! He wouldn't come to see me!"

"Yes, he would! He's come now to have a word with you, sir. Tom Mason, the blacksmith! Here he is, sir." He pushed Tom in front of him.

The figure by the table rose unsteadily, and grasped Tom by the arm.

"What would you have?—what would you have more?" it cried.

But Tom was dumb.

"She came back to you!" the dreadfully hollow voice urged, with trembling eagerness. "I always knew she would! I knew, when I first saw her, that *nothing* could buy her from you—long!"

Collins had crept up close to Tom, and stood ready in case the latter might be suddenly inspired

to make an attack; but he need not have feared: before the strangely impressive majesty of a dethroned and helpless intellect, Tom was as weak and guileless as when he first lay in the mother's arms.

"I'm sorry you don't look more strong and fresh. Don't—don't you go out for any exercise, sir?" he stammered pitifully. "You ought to, writing so much—and eat a lot too!" He spoke as to a little child.

"Yes, yes, I go out, and I eat enough to give me strength to write. I go every evening to put flowers on her grave. It is my right. But some one tries to supplant me; but don't let them—don't let them any more! You are strong—you can fight them off easily. I—I am not so strong as I was."

" All right, sir."

"There, there! Good night. Collins knows I mustn't be bothered with visitors — Collins oughtn't to have let you in. Collins, show him out. Don't let them put any more flowers on her grave, remember! There, there! I must get on with my book. I must write, write, write!"

"Good night, sir."

But the figure had resumed its occupation as before.

"Are you satisfied now?" Collins asked, when they were once more outside.

"Yes. How long has he been like this?"

- "Well, he began soon after Miss Lane died; but he's got much worse of late."
  - "What does the doctor say?"
- "That he won't live long—he's wasting rapidly away. Don't let any flowers be put on her grave, if you can help it; it puts him in a passion which leaves its mark on him; and he will only walk to the churchyard to put his flowers on her grave. It's a small favour to grant him."
- "No, a big one," corrected Tom; "but it's granted."
  - "Thank you."

Tom turned at the gate and looked at the valet attentively.

- "You've been faithful," he said suddenly, "according to your lights; and I'm sorry I used you so roughly just now."
- "Well, Mr Mason, I put in a word for you before the smash came: I begged him to leave her untried."
- "Did you? Thank you. Do you leave him alone when you're out?" Tom asked, with a backward, apprehensive glance at the cottage.
- "No. There's a woman in the kitchen. I lock the front door lest he should give her the slip that way."
  - "Doesn't that annoy him?"
- "No. He bothers about nothing now—except the book."

"The book? Oh, what he's writing, I suppose! What is it to be called?" Tom inquired dreamily.

"'The Dream-Woman.'"

"Ah!" cried Tom, as he offered his hand in farewell. "I think I could suggest a better title for it than that."

"Yes?" Collins returned, with interest. "What?" as he took the proffered hand.

Tom released his hand, and passed it wearily over his smarting eyes.

"'A Dreamer's Harvest,'" he said abruptly, and turned away.

#### CHAPTER XX

#### TOM

"Nothing now remains but a majestic memory."

OF course the date and place of Miss Lane's death leaked out in time to her admiring public, and many curious people invaded and investigated Grassville. But Hessie's public career had not been long enough to make a lasting impression on the giddy throng; so this unwelcome invasion was soon over. The Honeysuckle Cottage and the forge suffered the most under it, as might have been expected; but Miss White and Tom were patient and gracious, out of respect to the dear dead, and won golden opinions. Amongst the sightseers, one day, were a silver-haired lady and gentleman of easy, though subdued manners. After Miss White had herself shown them over the cottage and directed them to the forge, the gentleman, with old-fashioned courtesy, placed his card on her table with the remark that he

hoped, should she ever come into their neighbourhood, she would grant them the pleasure of returning, in some measure, her kindness. Miss White thanked them absently—the little blue-eyed wife had added her acknowledgments—and it was only on glancing at the card before throwing it away that Miss White discovered in her recent visitors her hero of the old, old days, and the little blue-eyed girl who had so bravely fought off an impending fate—and won.

Miss White and that man had blighted each other's young enthusiasms and ambitions, and had changed the natural course of each other's lives-yet they did not know each other when they met! How she laughed and cried over She had received a blow which, according to all preconceived notions, should have cut agonisingly into the very marrow of her bones - and yet she had felt nothing, nothing at all, except an hysterical inclination to laugh and cry on discovering it. Years afterwards, Tom confessed to experiencing something of the same appalled want of feeling, when he caught himself involuntarily but calmly singing his refractory little son to sleep on the sacred refrain of:

"One little hut among de bushes."

For Tom married Kate in time, and there 316



#### Tom

was a little Tom, a little Hessie, and a little Ethel White to keep alive merrily those saddened When visitors, after conversing with Tom, ventured to hint delicately to Miss White of an incomprehensible mental difference between the memorable blacksmith and his bright, hearty wife, she only answered their innuendoes by a quiet, inscrutable smile. Miss White herself thoroughly approved of the marriage—Kate crowning all her other good qualities by being an "Orange" girl-and took an active interest in her god-daughter; although the latter would often poutingly declare that godma loved Hess best-Hess, who had dusky curls, and sparkling brown eyes, and wilful ways strangely like those of the namesake who was no kin to her. so everything slowly settled down into its old monotonously peaceful track, and the tragedy that had been was buried, and faded out of the minds of the people. Still—

Everybody said it was a pretty little village. Everybody admired the ideal little cottage on its outskirts, with its thatched roof and rustic porch, round which the Honeysuckle vine lovingly clung. And everybody was charmed with its queenly mistress—stately, gracious Miss White—who was always so kind and pleasant, so clear-sighted and helpful, and, at the same time, gently reserved and mysteriously superior and beautiful.

Her tall, slender form and silver-crowned face with its cameo-like features were greeted everywhere with delight; but she was seen most at the blacksmith's, playing with his bonnie children, and giving his deferential wife a word or two of advice.

THE END.

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